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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study of four newly created charter schools in North Carolina. It explores the purpose and values that prompted and guided the initial formation of these schools. It opens with a review of the conflicting claims and ambivalent purposes that characterize the policy environment as it pertains to charter-school reform. This overview is followed by an examination of the challenges such schools face in remaining faithful to democratic ideals. For the study, two founders, the principal, and four teachers were observed and interviewed in each of the four schools to learn what they brought into these alternative learning environments in the way of knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and dispositions. The article describes the three dimensions of the schools that proved central to their establishing a distinctive community identity: social vision, inclusive leadership, and congruent pedagogy. The findings contradict the popular perception of charter schools as normatively coherent learning communities whose members are unified around a set of implicitly shared values and goals. The paper concludes that reductionist notions of charter unity ignore the harder truth that achieving authentic community schools entails much more than filtering out potentially dissonant elements. (Contains 91 references.) (RJM)

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Community as Incentive in the Formation of Charter Schools

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Community as Incentive in the Formation of Charter Schools

There can be little doubt that the 1990s has been a fertile decade for the charter school movement. Nationally, President Clinton has touted the desirability of charter schools in his State of the Union addresses, and Congress has authorized the US Department of Education to distribute millions of dollars in small grants to individual charter schools as a way of easing the financial strain encountered during their critical start-up phase. At the state level, about 36 states have enacted some form of charter school legislation that to varying degrees demonstrates their willingness to invest in the radical concept of autonomous and self-managing alternative public schools. Such robust growth could hardly have been anticipated back in 1991 when Minnesota became the first state to sanction these controversial schools. At that time, the commitment to allocate public dollars to the idea of independent rather than bureaucratically regulated schools was only a faint drumbeat on the nation's reform agenda. A host of critics fixed upon the infant charter school movement with something that amounted to more than casual suspicion. Yet in spite of this sometimes icy reception, the momentum in support of charter schools has led to the creation of about 1,200 schools in which some 300,000 students are enrolled (The Center for Education Reform, 1999). Although this statistic still represents only about .7 percent of the 45 million students who attend the nation's public schools, it constitutes an impressive gain in popularity for a reform idea that began on the margins of school improvement efforts.

A similar trajectory of rapid expansion has occurred in North Carolina. The North Carolina Charter Schools Act (1996) was rushed into law through the efforts of a bipartisan legislature. The uneasy alliance that produced this compromise brought together policy makers and school officials who held significantly different views on the nature of democratic society and the role schools should play in educating youth and shaping culture (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992; Spring, 1997). Although this political treaty was successful in bringing charter schools onto the radar screen of school reform across the state, the thrust of the legislation lacks sufficient capacity to unify the diversity of interests and outlooks that animate charter school organizers and staffs. In fact, considering the wide latitude accorded charter schools in selecting the social and educational values they choose to pursue, it is doubtful the extent to which unity in purpose or goals was ever seriously entertained as a specific aim of the reform (Wells, Grutzik, Carnochan, Slayton, & Vasudeva, 1999).

In North Carolina, this shortcoming can be attributed at least in part to the state's fitful history of school reform. Rallying around themes of freedom and order, liberals and conservatives in both political camps have incessantly jockeyed for control of the public schools, convinced that when persuasion fails, schools and the persons who work inside them can be authoritatively compelled to behave in a manner more hospitable to their interests. Each group has sought not only to dominate the terms of the debate but to employ government as a lever for imposing their own prescriptive designs on policy decisions. The consequences of this struggle are starkly visible in the heightened politicization of educational improvement and the succession of poorly designed and implemented initiatives dating back to the 1980s that for a variety of reasons have not achieved their goals. Career ladders and merit pay for teachers, outcome-based education, and site-based management are just some of the incomplete schemes that have come and gone while scarcely leaving a trace behind (Education Week, 1997).

It was as if one reform plan barely had time to mature and produce observable results before it was scrapped for a new and improved strategy certain to correct previous mistakes. Educational enlightenment forever hovered just one reform away. In light of these fragmented approaches and intractable disagreements over means and ends, recent school planners may have perceived little merit in waging an ideological battle over the educational values and moral purposes that charter schools should aspire to uphold. Such a struggle was certain to result in stalemate. As in other states, perhaps the architects of the North Carolina charter school bill considered its chief virtue to be that of a measured response to the steady demands for decentralization and increased community control of schools. If the program could be administered in an even-handed manner, then the charter concept appeared to provide an incremental approach toward the greater diversification of local schooling while indefinitely postponing a confrontation over the more superheated issue of vouchers (Contreras, 1995).

It was thus with much media fanfare and guarded optimism that the first crop of 34 charter schools opened during the summer of 1997. Fifty-nine schools were authorized for the second year, and now as the experiment enters its third year, the State Board of Education has granted final approval to about two dozen additional schools. This latest action raises the total to nearly 90 schools in which perhaps 15,000 students will be enrolled (NC Charter School Resource Center, 1998). By the time the next cycle of charter school applications comes up for review, the mandatory limit of 100 schools will be nearly reached and the General Assembly will have to vote on whether or not to lift the cap.

Is There a Common Charter School Culture?

Because the charter idea is still young and the schools a baffling array of divergent values, assumptions, and purposes, a unifying culture is difficult to discern (Lane, 1997). Anyone who has tried to grasp the charter school movement as a coherent educational reform strategy knows that the social, cultural, and political contexts of these schools are too multifaceted to permit easy classification. A major obstacle thwarting a broader understanding of charter schools is the fact that they are usually the products of discrete efforts. Because of a conspicuously private birthing process, an inherent tension exists between the independent impulse that directs their formation and the common interest vested in their educational operation and social effects. Compared to conventional schools, educators in charter schools have enhanced access to the lives of students and commensurately more discretionary power in deciding how the school's version of reality gets conveyed to them. An investigation into the dynamic interests that lead educators to organize a charter school and forge its unique cultural vista can enable us to more accurately assess the virtues undergirding the charter school movement. Moreover, it can provide insights into some of the more compelling issues and dilemmas encountered in the process of building viable school communities that in several respects move charters nearer to the center of contemporary school reform.

This study went inside four newly created charter schools during their first months of operation to explore the purposes and values that prompted and guided their initial formation. In each school, two founders, the principal, and four teachers were observed and interviewed to learn what they brought into these alternative learning environments in the way of knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and dispositions. The influence of these personal frames of reference in shaping the collective process of charter school formation and how these interactive qualities were expressed within the milieus of the schools comprised the primary targets of this research.

In investigating the nature and contexts of these value commitments, I begin with a review of the conflicting claims and ambivalent purposes that characterize the policy environment as it pertains to charter school reform. This is followed by an examination of the challenges confronted by communally organized schools in remaining faithful to democratic ideals and the dynamic processes of social exchange and human encounter. After a discussion of research methods, I present sketches of the four schools included in the study. Then I introduce three dimensions of the schools that proved central to their establishment of a distinctive community identity: social vision, inclusive leadership, and congruent pedagogy. My purpose in choosing these analytical constructs stems from their utility as idioms for the expression of community. I make no attempt to comprehensively describe them. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how the study schools struggled with some of the same conflicts and contradictions that persist in regular public schools: a willingness to embrace the liberating themes of democracy but to practice forms of schooling in which shared commitments and transcendent ideals remain elusive.

Conflicting Claims and Ambivalent Purposes

Although there is widespread popular support for schooling and the value it holds for both individual and societal growth, there is little public agreement regarding what is appropriate in regard to educational priorities, direction, or manner (Eisner, 1995; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). The emergence of charter schools has focused attention once again on the precarious balance that has long existed in this country between the tendency toward self-interest and a private conception of freedom on the one hand and the demands of civic engagement and mutual responsibility on the other (Sehr, 1997). The chronic tension over whether education is foremost a public or private good has resurfaced with dramatic vigor in the 1990s, and the debate over charter schools has aroused the sensibilities of policymakers, school officials, educators, parents, and stakeholder communities alike in questioning firmly held beliefs about the content and character of public education in America.

As it pertains to the organizational reform of schools that is consistent with the principles of community, the provision of education encompasses outcomes that are both public and private in nature (Levin, 1987; Gutmann, 1987). Because charter schools are situated at the intersection of where public and private education converge, they hold broad implications for the restructuring of public schooling. The ideologies and cultural arrangements that permeate classrooms and which shape both policy and practice in the way of organizational values, normative structures, and learning objectives have their derivation in the orientations of the school's professional staff and the community in which the school is embedded (Apple & Weis, 1983; Henig, 1995; Newmann, 1991). The extent to which a charter school can function with no greater legitimacy than as a self-contained, idiosyncratic entity inviting limited interactions with other schools and publics raises serious questions about how a school defines its meaning, purpose, and identity. If the conceptions, culture, and organizational features of contemporary public schools persist as a form of social inheritance (Katz, 1987; Sarason, 1996), then the will and capacity of charter school personnel to disrupt these regularities have implications that resonate throughout all quarters of the school restructuring movement.

The arguments raised and the values served by charter schools are more political than technical. Depending on how educational quality is defined, determining whether charter schools signal a hopeful or discouraging direction is a complex undertaking that is not readily amenable to the standardized comparisons and evaluation techniques that are customarily used in judging school performance. Just what it means to educate for freedom, justice, equality, and compassion in a democratic society in which no single aim or end in life is presumed to be absolute must remain central to any assessment relating to the social desirability of charter schools.

A fully realized notion of democratic education implies a society in which the good is shared and defined by all. To envision a society in which citizens willingly come together to collectively determine the future course of their lives and communities is to acknowledge that discussions about charter schools need to reflect upon what the ultimate ends of the educational process are to be. Because human existence is distinguished by a plurality of commitments, the controversy over institutional choice arrangements such as charter schools must be premised on a clear articulation of educational aims and ideals. Quality education is a multidimensional construct that is dependent on much more than instructional expediency and outcomes measured exclusively by standardized test scores. The content of learning encompasses objectives that span intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual domains. When so much of the educational conversation these days is reduced to talk about student performance levels and devising ever more effective techniques for nudging them higher, arguments about aims and ideals seem extravagant and increasingly out of place in the rarefied atmosphere found inside most policy circles.

Can Charter Schools Be Democratic Communities?

The elements essential to the functioning of a democracy revolve around the concept of the educated citizen as an socially embedded actor and empowered individual (Fraser, 1997). The notion of schooling implied by democracy is that of an agency of social reform in which individuals achieve self-realization by contributing their special talents to the overall well-being of their community. This concept is couched in a language of possibility and predicated on the belief that when exposed to the proper conditions, persons have the capacity to act intelligently and cooperatively to identify common problems, gather evidence, weigh alternatives, and implement reasonable solutions. In articulating the reciprocal dependency we have for one another, democracy neither asserts too strongly the autonomy of the individual nor subordinates personal growth to the domineering authority of the state, community, or group. Individuals strive to make the best of themselves through their devotion to the common interest. The character of democratic education is, as Gutmann (1987) suggests, "a shared trust, of parents, citizens, teachers, and public officials, the precise terms of which are to be democratically decided within the bounds of the principles of nondiscrimination and nonrepression" (p. 288). In her formulation, nonrepression constrains the power of the state or group from employing education to restrict the consideration of competing images of the good life and good society. Similarly, nondiscrimination insists that all children be educated so that they are adequately prepared to deliberate between competing conceptions of the good life. When carried to its logical conclusion, this approach strengthens "our commitment to share the rights and the obligations of citizenship with people who do not share our complete conception of the good life" (p. 47).

The educational value conflicts that are most problematic are the ones which force us to consider the kind of society we wish to become (Henig, 1995). The numerous and often contradictory purposes that schools labor under give rise to a politics of education in which different groups maneuver for advantage in shaping the outcomes of policy decisions. When a consensus about goals is difficult to obtain, school officials can find themselves embroiled in polarized disputes that pit efficiency against equity, competition against community, and individual achievement against the common good. In those cases where some resolution must be reached, it is sometimes considered preferable to defuse the more divisive issues of educational policy by "deciding who will decide" rather than discussing in concrete terms why one particular educational end is preferable to another (Plank & Boyd, 1994, p. 265). By declining to arrive at any definitive position that may risk offending some powerful lobby or outspoken constituency, the umbrella of educational policy making is widened in a conciliatory gesture intended to protect the wobbly public school coalition from further erosion.

The consequence of such action is that although it may arrest the flow into the private sector of disgruntled groups or individuals, it ultimately falls short of providing strong identifiable direction to a system already weakened by ambiguity in regard to what the structure, content, and methods of education should be. In order to minimize risk, it placates dissent instead of taking a potentially unpopular stand on critical issues of purpose. As Plank & Boyd note, "there are no technical solutions to the political conflicts encountered in the educational system. Research does not speak with a single voice, and "science" provides at best only weak guidance for public policy" (p. 273). So by relying on a policy of appeasement, the culture of mainstream policy making may unwittingly be draining what remains of the vitality of the institution. Instead of invigorating public confidence, policy decisions that insist on begging the hard questions may actually be hastening public education's demise.

The lure of simplistic solutions as remedies to complex policy problems does not bode well for the dissemination of democratic values. Because democratic institutions are such volatile structures to sustain, their vulnerability requires constant adjustments if they are to survive the stresses incurred by the disorderly politics associated with self-government. Even if complete agreement on the purposes and goals of education remains elusive in the end, the willingness to engage in a collective effort to postulate new directions and new strategies for improving public education can lead to progress and positive change (Darling-Hammond, 1993). Uncertainty and imperfection will never be fully weeded out of schools because schools reflect the inherent fallibility of human nature. Yet acknowledging the fragilities of human existence does not imply a search for mechanistic solutions that negate the role of community in bringing each person and the world into closer engagement. In fact, rather than rendering democratic school structures quaint or obsolete, the dislocations wrought by postmodern society only amplify the vital importance of school communities in ameliorating the on-going symptoms of social stress and cultural fatigue.

Because a dialogical community is widely regarded as a salutary environment for cultivating a public able to carry out its moral mission, the most tenacious school conflicts cannot be circumvented indefinitely without weakening the democratic mission of schools. If we consent to participate in a society in which the standards used to determine membership are defined only by those designated as supremely knowledgeable or gifted, then we surrender our stake in the immediacy of democracy's outcomes. The nagging disappointments and fragility of the world leave us no alternative but to collaborate as partners in the continual reconstruction of meaning. To renege on this social obligation is to cease acting in accordance with those egalitarian ideals that call for a more just and equitable society (Feinberg, 1990).

When Bennis (1990) observes that "America has always been at war with itself. We have always dreamt of community and democracy but always practiced individualism and capitalism" (p. 102), he alludes to the notion not always appreciated by policy makers that public schools are constantly being compromised by the shifting politics of the culture wars. There are no mass solutions for the permanent reform of America's schools. Even alternative institutional arrangements such as charter schools represent an instrumental approach to change and renewal, the means to any number of possible ends rather than some definitive end in itself. The school communities that coalesce around the forces of local control are not sacrosanct or final. Depending on the type of environment a school elects to provide, the consequences of community can either be liberating or oppressive to its members and thus indirectly enriching or debilitating to society. Arguments in favor of locally constituted communities have long been used to justify exclusion based on racial and social-class differences, for example; the variants that revolve around this theme enjoy an venerable pedigree. There is no paucity of nativist claims in the historical record.

But it is important to remember that the variables associated with these tendencies are always a matter of design and inclination. The ends to which they are used are not foreordained. It is through choice and conviction that some educators are impelled to move beyond the limits of plurality encountered within the boundaries of their immediate community whereas others feel little such compunction. Conceptions of competition and cooperation vary greatly. The extent to which a charter school restructures itself to espouse a democratic orientation is in part a measure of how broadly or narrowly the learning community interprets its autonomy (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995). Because all schools contend with the daunting task of having to reduce the complexity of the world to a facsimile of manageable size, the combination of elements that get included in the school environment and those that get culled become the determining factors in construing the educative effect to be achieved. This normative mixture is constantly being reapportioned, and it applies to both material and human ingredients.

Schooling and knowledge, because they are social constructions, lose any clear meaning when they are severed from a context in which individuals and groups struggle to figure out how to live together in a less than perfect world. History and social identity, that is, the attempt to locate ourselves and others within a coherent set of ideas and relations that explain the world, are constantly being written and rewritten. Dewey (1916/66) reminds us that an abstract idea like education has no preestablished or fixed aims. Only teachers, students, parents, and others directly involved in the structures and processes of the school endeavor itself possess such a vision. He cautions that "Their purposes are indefinitely varied, differing with different children, changing as children grow and with the growth of experience on the part of the one who teaches" (p. 107). In other words, the landscape of learning is never static; it is ever shifting, ever in motion. Social aims that are internally designated, that derive from currents flowing within a school community, help a school to choose how to act in a manner that is morally consistent with its purposes.

But any aims will not do. Aims that seek to expand the capacities of the individual while maintaining fidelity to public ends deserve the highest priority. As the premier socializing institution, schools stand in the forefront of community for inducting youth into democracy's ways and means. But because values and ideas are not created equal, communities of inquiry must create an open forum for fairly deciding which truths will be legitimized and which will be rejected. Community provides the setting in which assertions and understandings are tested by subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Truths that survive this process and which are deemed essential to the sustenation of democracy must be preserved in classroom practice or else the very enterprise of democratic schooling will degenerate into a self-congratulatory slogan, a sham exercise wedded to orthodoxy and prescription.

From Dewey's perspective, a defensible democratic standard for a worthy social life consists of two confluent strands: "the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups" (ibid., p. 99). Based on this reasoning, the social ideal toward which a desirable school community should tend is one in which the categories of race, ethnicity, social class, language, gender, and disability are confronted as directly as possible. This conscious stance doesn't automatically make schools less volatile politically so much as it shifts the action onto a local stage where face-to-face relationships can be more readily transacted. School communities that fail to narrow distances by nourishing authentic human connections increase the likelihood that they will retreat into isolation and a self-justifying exclusivity. Schools that barricade themselves against the uncertainties and confusions of the wider world deprive their students of crucial learning experiences and pose an imminent danger to the spread of a democratic ethos (Greene, 1993).

It follows then that rules for the healthy governance of community life can neither be compelled from above nor left to chance to emerge from below. A shared moral framework is the product of mutual inquiry and deliberation, and as such requires continual scrutiny and revision. In those instances when a community cannot establish acceptable parameters for educating its children, then there must be an appeal to the centralized authority of the state. But although the state can serve as an arbiter of property and liberty rights, protecting the vulnerable and disadvantaged from those who would exercise their superior power to gain undue advantage over others, it cannot implant a spirit of democracy into a setting where faith in the ability to work collectively toward a better society has been eroded. For all the individual rights and freedoms that accrue from having a legally constituted liberal government, the state cannot make damaged communities whole or erase the sacrifices, humiliations, and affronts to conscience endured by educators and families over the years (Arons, 1997).

In this regard, the power of the state is no more of an absolute authority than is a regime founded exclusively on the preferences of individuals acting to maximize their own potentialities. Both are necessary but not sufficient resources for securing the principles of democracy in public education. It is precisely because education is widely considered to be essential to the growth of American culture and democracy that the struggles over school choice are so passionately waged. Charter schools are an explosive issue because Americans are coming to realize that community is impossible without the provision of adequate schooling and schooling that is not continuous with the values and traditions of the community is destined to achieve an outcome that no one much desires. This positions the educational community at the nexus of a democracy in which the public and private realms are inseparably stitched together. Absent the leadership potential of the school community for insisting on an ethic of care and responsibility and both the culture and individual suffer. As Martin Luther King Jr. tried to explain, the freedom of each is contingent upon the freedom of all. The master comprehends the nature of freedom because of the servitude of another; patriarchy is expressed in tandem with the subjugation of women. Each agent helps to define the condition of the other. It could therefore be argued that the most promising corrective to the passivity and detachment that characterizes much of contemporary life may well be the enlistment of a more expansive and thoroughgoing form of democracy than the docile version to which we have grown accustomed (Sehr, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 1998).

This reformulation finds its fullest expression in community, for only a morally grounded community can successfully mediate the majoritarian intrusions of the state and the debilitating isolation of the individual (Tocqueville, 1945). It is community that links the state and individual in a respectful and enlivening partnership. Moreover, it is within community that a culture of belonging is fostered that is able to stand above and guide the individual toward heightened forms of personal meaning and social understanding. Community situates individual excellence within a larger context that makes the private cultivation of talent an indispensable asset to be exchanged with others, not as a commodity but as something organic. In his writings, William James proposed that the dialectic of experience was composed of a need to act with (unity) balanced against a need to act against (multiplicity) (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, Whalen, & Wong, 1993, p. 257). Given these concerns for the ideal social and cultural conditions in which education can flourish, it is reasonable to suggest that the interdependence of freedom and community cannot be sustained without an unwavering commitment to diversity in culture, plurality of association, and division of authority (Nisbet, 1969).

Thus, motivated school communities that take it upon themselves to interact not only within their own borders but to aggressively inquire after the knowledge lodged within communities that operate outside their regular orbits contribute to a more vibrant democratic culture. One measure of the strength of a community is the determination with which it exposes students and adults to others residing beyond the pale of their accustomed frames of reference. In doing so, activist communities shrink the cultural and intellectual distances that keep the members of society apart and increase the likelihood that enduring connections will be made. They recognize that the individual must be embedded within an expansive web of reciprocal social relationships in order for the internal and external communities to fulfill their complementary educational functions. Eisner (1995) points out that "Diversity in education breeds social complexity and social complexity can lead to a richness in culture that uniformity can never provide. What democratic cultures need is unity in diversity; both are necessary" (p. 99).

As currently conceived and configured, it is unclear whether charter and other communally organized schools can provide the sufficiently robust institutional foundation necessary for enlarging the type of social and moral unity that I have been discussing. In the sections that follow, I draw upon three cases to look in depth at some of the potentials and obstacles involved with developing this conception of democracy.

Methodology

Four start-up charter schools were investigated using a qualitative multicase study approach. The study subjects consisted of two founders, the principal, and four teachers at each school, for a total of 28 participants. Because the primary purposes of this study were exploratory, I did not seek to determine causal connections between variables. Rather, my goal was to enlarge the existing conceptual frameworks used to understand the perspectives on school reform held by a charter school's organizational core. Specifically, I sought to make more explicit the values, beliefs, purposes, and assumptions of the actors directly responsible for forming these schools and the effects these meanings had on shaping the content and character of the particular school environment.

As the sole researcher, I spent several months shuttling back and forth between the schools. To accommodate the time and scheduling constraints of respondents, it was often necessary for me to conduct my research in more than one school during the same time period. In each setting I used the same combination of data collection methods: document analysis; observation; and individual in-depth interviews.

Case studies are an appropriate technique for examining contemporary events in their natural setting in which multiple issues are entangled (Merriam, 1998). Their flexibility enables them to capture the complex dynamics of the change process as they occur in local contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Importantly, the four case studies were not intended to constitute a statistical sample in the experimental sense. Rather, the sampling strategy was purposeful in design and based on informational considerations that focused on the phenomena of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Site selection followed a logic that stressed maximum variation in a school's geographic location, philosophy, target population, size, educational program, instructional focus, governance and administrative plan, and how the school proposed to respond to community needs and interests (Patton, 1990).

When the diversity of the sample is selectively broadened in accordance with specific criteria like these, more confidence can be placed in the patterns and variations that emerge as a result of different school conditions or attributes (Yin, 1994). The findings that are most useful in informing our judgments about other situations are those that emerge from sites that are heterogeneous rather than homogeneous in nature. Thus, four schools studied in depth have the potential to yield more valid data than numerous sites studied less intently (Schofield, 1990).

Presuppositions about the nature of school settings and what the important dimensions of the data would be were not made in advance. Instead, interrelationships flowed from the data which led to descriptive themes and assertions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Findings and insights are presented as working hypotheses and as such are generalizable to theoretical propositions but not to populations or universes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

When a preliminary draft of the study was completed, copies were distributed among the respondents for their critical review and assessment. They were invited to correct any factual errors that I might have made in addition to checking for omissions, misperceptions, or unwarranted assertions. Their comments were given careful consideration and several of their recommendations were incorporated into the final version of the report.

Profiles of the Four Study Schools

Descriptions of the schools provide a way of illuminating the range of settings and orientations represented by the four schools. In focusing attention on the differences and similarities encountered at each site, the profiles highlight distinct aspects of each school that may facilitate a better understanding of the motivations that undergirded the formation of these schools. The names of all schools, participants, and places are fictitious.

Riverview Charter School

Riverview is located in a working-class neighborhood of an urban school district in which about 30,000 students are enrolled. The majority population in the district is African American, comprising 57% of the total student enrollment. The white population is about 36% and the remaining 7% is mainly Hispanic. About 40% of all students are eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch subsidy. A contentious 1992 merger of the city and county school systems precipitated the flight of many white families to the more affluent suburbs, prompting school officials to implement a magnet school program aimed at winning back some of these families. It was into this racially, ethnically, and economically stratified environment that Riverview was launched.

Several founders of this K - 3 school of 100 students describe themselves as social activists in the progressive vein. For instance, a couple are associated with a community development organization whose goal is to revitalize the sagging infrastructure of the inner city by providing start-up capital to traditionally underserved segments of society such as minorities, women, and low-wealth families. Others on the board provide diversity training to schools, businesses, and other organizations. Riverview was conceived to be the educational manifestation of this progressive outlook. A class size no larger than 15 students, thematic teaching, and a culturally sensitive and integrated curriculum comprise the matrix around which the school is structured. The school staff possess a strong commitment to empowering marginalized students of every background within a caring and respectful climate.

Despite reasonably broad recruitment efforts, the founders failed to secure a diverse enrollment. As a consequence, the 98% black enrollment runs counter to their intention of creating a multicultural learning environment. Nevertheless, active learning is embedded in a social and moral framework that promotes tolerance and cross-cultural literacy. In building a school community in which knowledge and power are to be more equitably shared, founders and staff resist the notion that the traditional academic disciplines are hierarchically superior to other forms of knowing. Prescriptive curricula, authoritarian teaching, and formal social relations are not encouraged. Founders and staff share a cohesive vision for the school which includes a commitment to working closely with families so that Riverview does not become culturally insulated from the life of the surrounding community.

Hickory Ridge Charter School

This K - 6 school of 120 students is located in the prosperous suburbs of a compact urban district that serves 8,000 students. Only 17% of the students in this district qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program, the lowest percentage in the state. Due to the high rate of residential and business growth, school construction cannot keep pace and the district suffers from the effects of school overcrowding. So, by striving to maintain a student-teacher ratio of only 16 to 1, Hickory Ridge offers a classroom setting that is notably different from that of the typical public school.

The desire to create an orderly and personalized learning environment is one of Hickory Ridge's prime selling points. As one of the first charter schools in this region, they have been able to reach out to dissatisfied parents and students across a wide geographic area . The school has attracted a diversified student population that is about 65% white and 35% African-American. Students hail from a variety of backgrounds, including families that live below the poverty line to affluent households headed by parents with doctorate or professional degrees.

The founders of the school are social conservatives who espouse strong libertarian sentiments and are sympathetic to the tenets of home schooling. For these fiercely independent founders, parental sovereignty remains paramount to the interests of the state. They are extremely critical toward district and state school bureaucracies whom they see as inducting children into a social and educational code that violates the values taught in the home. As a result, Hickory Ridge prides itself on being especially responsive to the family and has attracted home-schoolers searching for a more worldly learning experience. The school's core identity of promoting excellence for all students is manifested in the implementation of E.D. Hirsch's (1987) Core Knowledge program. Hickory Ridge's populist approach to doing school is firmly anchored in traditional academic values and knowledge categories. This model of education appears to reassure potentially skittish families about the ability of the charter school to achieve its goals.

The thrust of the school's philosophy is directed toward imparting a common American culture through the use of homogeneous content matter and teacher authority. Multicultural perspectives are not strongly encouraged and constructivist learning activities are frowned upon.

Through the use of a highly structured and information laden curriculum, Hickory Ridge hopes to develop exemplary young citizens equipped with analytical thinking skills, a passion for learning, and a virtuous character. Founders and staff are convinced that in an equalitarian and meritocratic learning environment, disparities in the academic performance of socially diverse students can be narrowed or even eliminated.

Sandhills Charter School

Although this school is situated in the same district as Hickory Ridge, the schools have little in common. The founders of this combined middle and high school subscribe to a social and political outlook that leans sharply in a progressive direction. As at Hickory Ridge, the founders here are also concerned about the congested conditions in the regular public schools, but their discontent has been channeled into a different set of solutions. About 95 students representing a range of social backgrounds attend Sandhills in the hope of finding social acceptance and academic success in a school environment that values intimacy, respect for individual expression, and non-coercive teaching methods. About 90% of the students are white and the remaining 10% African American. Because the encompassing district has endured years of animosity over the disparate educational outcomes of its white and black students, Sandhills seeks to repair these wounds by creating a school community devoted to helping students learn what they share in common rather than reinforcing the idea that differences are fixed and insurmountable.

In keeping with this orientation, Sandhills targets adolescents alienated from the impersonality of large schools along with those who are disengaged from a competitive school climate in which admission into college is often equated with educational and individual worth. Through a flexible curriculum structure that includes a strong emphasis on aesthetics, Sandhills works to customize learning situations so that they appeal to student interests and styles of learning. Within a context of self-discipline and self-direction, students are given opportunities to select themes of study and wherever possible, control the pace of their progress. Accordingly, students are entrusted with a level of responsibility that forms the basis of all academic and social expectations. In organizing the school along non-hierarchical lines, Sandhills delegates numerous administrative duties to faculty and students, and families wield considerable influence in shaping school policy.

The school perceives students' emotional, psychological, and academic lives to be of a piece. Teaching is integrative, assessment relies on portfolios and exhibitions, and students are encouraged to undertake independent study projects that combine experiential learning with community sponsored apprenticeships. In spite of this seemingly unified structure, founders, teachers, students, and parents frequently quarreled over issues of organization, authority, and discipline. Moreover, the failure to coalesce around shared purposes and values caused Sandhills' academic focus to be seriously disrupted. The school witnessed faculty turnovers and a drop in enrollment before improved communication and community awareness stabilized the situation.

Somerset Charter School

This K - 6 school of approximately 300 students is located in a black neighborhood of a small city that serves as the hub of a rural school district of 12,000 students. Fifty-six percent of the students in this district participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program. Somerset's founders have a history of community activism that stretches back several years to the beginnings of a summer enrichment program targeted at local black youth. By building on this earlier success, the founders aim to further their commitment to self-improvement for the disaffected black community in which they live. This mission looms large in Somerset's approach to community renewal, because the neighborhood in which the school is located has been in sharp decline for years. The dislocations triggered by the advent of desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s served to erode the social and economic stability of this once vibrant and cohesive community. Now disfigured by poverty and demoralized by crime and drug use, the neighborhood teeters between a past that has been largely forgotten and a future that offers few assurances.

The founders are insistent that Somerset's vision should derive its strength from a strong identification with African American traditions and experience. This orientation is expressed through an arts-based curriculum and the teacher-student and student-student relationships which are structured around the idea of family. The founders believe that racial affirmation and cultural knowledge are essential to academic and social-emotional growth. From this perspective, the lives of students and the parental community are to be the source instead of the object of study. The pursuit of this goal was given a boost when Somerset turned out to be 90% black, 8% Hispanic, and 2% white.

However, this overarching focus on a single cultural identity is strongly resisted by the principal and several of the teachers who have no historic ties to the local community and who imagine cultivating a more inclusive image for Somerset. These tensions and strained working conditions are exacerbated by the presence of an educational management organization hired by the founders to provide the start-up capital they had been unable to obtain on their own. The layers of conflict unleashed by these competing interests contribute to a fractious environment in which neither the founders, principal, nor teachers seem content. The resentments and loss of faith over Somerset's dimmed prospects for creating an empowering school environment have had negative consequences. For instance, the fallout from these struggles appears to have dissuaded a number of white families from enrolling their children. Also, teachers complain that the climate of suspicion has made it harder for them to develop close and trusting relationships with students and parents.

Social Agency

All founders embedded the various reasons for starting their charter schools within a context of a morally responsive community able to confront the specific needs and interests of its constituents. The commitment of the founders to start these schools stemmed from a desire to activate a particular cultural, political, or economic outlook. By publicly espousing an identifiable system of values, beliefs, and assertions about the relationship of school to society and giving these ideas an institutional home, founders announced their efforts to an audience of potentially receptive families living in proximity of the schools. In doing so, they hoped to secure a dependable base of support for their wider distribution.

In keeping with such ambitious purposes, the schools were imbued with multiple layers of meanings. At a fundamental level, each school signified a dissent from the existing conditions of public schooling and a conspicuous disruption to the dominant patterns of bureaucratic control and influence. But beyond issues of governance and self-determination, founders imagined their schools not just as sites of alternative intellectual activity but as agencies of cultural resistance possessing unlimited potential for energizing nascent social movements. Given a fortuitous combination of insight and perseverance, the founders hoped that their fledgling schools would mature into something socially meaningful both for their own members and the citizens of the larger community. Founders saw their schools as holding out an unprecedented opportunity for connecting the curriculum of the school with the social and economic lives of their students in new and powerful ways.

Although the founders varied widely in their backgrounds and philosophical orientations, none seemed content to stop at merely interpreting the world for their students. In keeping with their own perspectives on society, each sought to organize curricula experiences in such a way as to prepare students to accept the validity of certain knowledge forms and practices while encouraging them to question and alter others. Although the founders' visions were composed in distinctive ways, the learning environments they worked to construct tended to address essential questions that revolved around how and why children learn, the nature of a free society, and the role of schooling in pluralistic America (Kane, 1992). Who do we want our children to be? What kind of a world do we want them to inherit? What kinds of knowledge will enable them to lead productive lives? How should this knowledge be applied? What sorts of personal and social habits should schools attempt to cultivate in children? Theirs was not a romantic quest. Within the contexts of their school communities, the answers to these perplexing questions were rooted in pragmatic considerations.

The process of school formation was essentially one of fleshing out raw educational ideas, and it was always guided by the questions the founders asked as they progressed from the conceptual phase of school formation to the more precarious implementation phase. The common sense approach taken by many of the founders served them well in the beginning when the prospect of school formation seemed infinitely attainable. But when faced with the often unquiet realities of school and classroom, they soon discovered that articulating a credible vision or policy to other community members was anything but a mechanical task. Even when purposes and goals seemed unambiguous and straightforward, there was always a chance that these concepts would be distorted as they underwent interpretation. Teachers and families did not necessarily come into the school with similar social identities or interests as the founders, and they differed in their intuitive understandings of how teaching and learning should be configured. Reaching preliminary agreements about the proper distribution of power and the meanings that were to be shared hinged on finding a universal narrative that could be told in classrooms and community gatherings in which all constituents were represented.

When the founders were less than clear about some aspect of the school they wished to act upon, community agreement was not automatically received. In these not uncommon situations, the smooth flow of dialogue that usually culminated in unanimous support frequently become mired in confusion over divergent meanings and direction. If a policy choice was inadequately explained by the founders, the passions that animated that preference often served as a proxy for a more lucid articulation of the decision itself (Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997). Arguing emotions rather than theories or principles increased the likelihood that misunderstandings would steer the schools away from the original intentions of the founders. When these difficulties occurred, founders were compelled to adjust the rate of progress until it became commensurate with those posing questions and seeking assurances. As frustrating as these shifts were to the founders, they served a necessary function in maintaining community cohesiveness. But even so, not every impasse was effectively resolved. Every interruption to the flow of events threatened anew the possibility for constructing an effective context for praxis. Alternately, each detour carried with it the potential for achieving greater understanding. It was impossible to predict which way the outcome would go.

To facilitate the task of expressing a more precise vision and then marshaling support around it, a few founders enlisted the aid of staff members who were more knowledgeable than they about organizing and managing schools. In these situations, the problem of clarifying and guiding a vision toward an acceptable level of implementation evolved into more of a collaborative endeavor shared by various members of the community. For the founders, opening up the school formation process to the influence of perspectives other than their own went beyond a mere symbolic gesture. It demonstrated a genuine willingness to relinquish sole proprietorship of the school, an acknowledgment that the ends of education lay beyond the grasp of any one person to achieve. Even though the founders lobbied hard for certain things to be done their way, they understood that a school they had to strongarm into compliance was not the type of school with which they wanted to be associated. In fact, these were exactly the kinds of schools they were fleeing.

The fact that the founders' imprint was evident wherever one looked in these schools did not necessary imply an arrogant use of power. Because the founders never pretended to have an answer for every problem, they typically preferred accommodation to conflict. To their credit, they indicated that there were many aspects of running a school that they needed to learn from others. Yet, the founders were never able to forgot that it was their designs that had been drafted into the official charter documents. As they were quick to explain, the bottom line was that the state held them legally accountable for the school's outcomes. It was their names that were affixed to the charters, and it would be their phones that would ring if something went seriously wrong. At the same time that they succeeded in muting their more narcissistic impulses, they also held themselves to be first among equals. Their refusal to surrender complete control and their superior veto power loomed over all transactions. In the final analysis, it was the will of the founders that constituted the basic texts that were translated into school structures and practices.

Riverview

For Riverview's founders, changing the educational picture for disadvantaged children in a racially polarized district formed the essence of their struggle. The prospect of organizing an entire school around a coherent set of values and ideas was a vastly more compelling prospect than fighting for change in random classrooms scattered across the district. Because they were interested in establishing something of lasting value, the founders saw the opportunity to construct a school from the bottom up as a highly appealing change strategy.

Riverview was envisioned to be the means through which estranged groups and individuals would escape their isolation and come together to explore points of commonality. Embedded within this ambitious scheme was the assumption that schools constituted along democratic lines could effectively serve as the locus of change for the creation of communities that transcended demographic boundaries and social distinctions. Suddenly it was within the realm of possibility for people separated by race, ethnicity, social class, religion, or custom, to cross the thresholds of their accustomed worlds and unite with strangers who shared their values and aspirations.

"Every child has innate talent and our job is to free that and help it blossom" said a founder. She was not unique in rejecting the supposition that a charter school was bound to evolve into an exclusive community propelled by narrow self-interest. The Riverview founders spoke in a language of inclusion that imagined a common destiny for the school's members. They identified cross-cultural knowledge as the centerpiece of a democratic-communitarian ideal that permeated the curriculum and the span of social relations. "This school is part of a larger community" a second founder said. "And just as we are responsible to the community, we want them to be part of us. Community is the school itself. Riverview is a chance to figure out how to deal with local racial dynamics. A lot of people think in terms of black and white, but equity may be even more important than diversity. Still, they are so closely aligned that they are hard to separate."

The expectation that students could master the academic curriculum at the same time that they became more socially aware was a guiding force at Riverview. Not only were the two strands compatible, the founders believed that they were mutually supportive and should not be falsely dichotomized. The strong emphasis that the founders placed upon the metaphor of community and their reliance on shared decision making were together a tacit acknowledgement of their inability to control all aspects of school formation. Their confidence in the collective capacity of community to resolve logistical problems and ameliorate philosophical differences was a refrain heard numerous times throughout the interviews. As this founder observed:

> I don't know how we can expect our children to become good citizens if they have no clue about what their community is like.... If you think of education as just something you do out of a basal reader or math book, you limit that child's potential. All the academic stuff is great ... but the issues around leadership, self-esteem, and community awareness you have to work a lot harder at because they are not things that people assume. There's community in terms of your classroom, community in terms of your school, and there's the community that surrounds you.... We decided we were going to unite people of different races and economic levels because it's so segregated in terms of where you live.

Hickory Ridge

The social vision followed at Hickory Ridge was less connected to the cultural traditions of its students than at the other schools in the study. Of primary importance to these founders was the superiority of objective and factual knowledge over constructed or negotiated meanings. "We don't want people who can't understand and filter the stuff that's coming over the TV and could be led any which way" exclaimed one founder, "which seems to be what the government wants. Because then you're not a citizen, you're a subject.... The present approach in our schools is to emphasize process over content. Well, that puts you at a tremendous disadvantage."

Because there was an uncommon degree of unanimity among the founders for articulating a defining vision for Hickory Ridge, their influence had been decisive from the inception of the school. In their formulation, the proper role of a school is to expose students to a structured body of knowledge that will prepare them to prosper in the American social order and compete in the global economy. The founders endorsed a social efficiency model of education, arguing that the school was not the proper agency for taking a political stand in regard to issues of social reform. Because the individual was the source of all reason and moral action, the energies of a school needed to be trained on helping students to achieve their full potential as individuals. If society indirectly benefited as a consequence of this educational focus then well and good the founders believed, but such an outcome should not be considered a principal aim of effective schooling.

In formulating their vision, the founders stressed the importance of holding out uniformly high expectations for all students within a disciplined environment that encouraged individual and competitive excellence. They claimed that skills-based, constructivist teaching methods actually diminished a student's opportunity to learn. Thus, the surest path to amassing intellectual capital and ensuring social equity was to master a body of content-rich knowledge that was essential for everyone to know. This approach provided the best guarantee that poor and working-class children would be able to compete on a level playing field with middle- class and affluent children.

Consistent with these epistemological assumptions was the antipathy of the founders toward what they considered to be unwarranted governmental intrusion into the content and conduct of schooling. They saw coercive governmental behavior as a subversive force in the promotion of community because the educational interests of the state frequently clashed with the values and beliefs of families. Because of the majoritarian power of the state and local school district to socialize children in ways that ran counter to the moral imperatives of families, Hickory Ridge was conceived as a way to escape the centralizing tactics and authoritarian values imposed on ordinary citizens by bureaucratic elites. As one founder expressed the importance of teaching students a common core of meanings that would be independent of government designs:

> The quality of education determines the strength of your nation in the end. If we are to continue down our downward path, then it doesn't matter how prosperous we are today because we'll eventually go down the tubes as every other rich and powerful nation has done before. I'd just like to stave off the evil day a little longer by striving for educational excellence.

The fact that Hickory Ridge boasted a minority enrollment of 35% in a district where minorities amounted to roughly 18% of the student population validated the founders' claim that a curriculum built on academic rigor could appeal to a heterogeneous population. Armed with an adequate store of knowledge, economic mobility was within the reach of every student regardless of whatever social or cultural disadvantages they may have known. Under a regime of demanding academic preparation, the ladder of success would be accessible for all to climb. A second founder described the situation in this way:

> If school does a good job, race is not going to matter that much. I don't think most people would be upset living next to Michael Jordan or Bill Cosby. Race is not always the issue

> that people think. Money is the issue, and education can lift a lot of people into a higher income bracket.... Diversity is certainly a positive, but I'd say it's not as important as having a classroom where you actually learn to read. You don't learn everything in a classroom. You can get your basics in the elementary school and get your diversity elsewhere if you need to.

Sandhills

At Sandhills, the founders expressed their holistic social vision in terms of enabling students to better integrate the part of their lives they spent inside school with the part spent outside. The artificial distance dividing these realities was perceived as a major factor leading to the disengagement of many students from both the intellectual and social realms. The founders spoke repeatedly of the necessity to view students as something more dynamic than mere repositories of information. They argued that students needed to be acknowledged as complex human beings who had emotional as well as cognitive domains that required attention. The students who came to Sandhills were grappling with failure and uncertainty, and new school experiences had to be presented carefully in order not to dishearten them even more. As one founder lamented, "We are a culture that for 40 years has been purging the educational system of any discussion of values, dealing instead only with knowledge and skills. And we are reaping the benefits of that choice."

The founders believed that contemporary schooling failed many students because it did not adequately prepare them to appreciate how different actions can lead to different consequences. When students are unable to discern the causal relationship between action and outcome, then the moral contexts of choosing are relativized to an extent in which any choice will do. But in a democracy, the founders explained, freedom and responsibility are predicated on the ability of the individual and community to exercise an informed sense of choice. Students need to develop the capacity to discriminate between wise and unwise life choices and to anticipate the immediate and long-term effects that flow from these decisions. It baffled the founders why conventional schooling focused so strongly on teaching students how to function within a consistent and orderly world instead of teaching them how to thrive amid the changes and inconstancies that characterize everyday life. In this regard, there was little interest on the part of founders to impose a rigid set of judgments on what the proper ends of student choices should be. They were not seeking to induct students into a fixed moral code or subject them to a prescriptive set of behaviors. Rather, they were mainly concerned that students arrived at their choices through a process of inquiry and reflection instead of through habit or impulse. Sandhills expended a good deal of effort to attract students who were searching for this type of guidance.

In discussing the implications of students being unable to successfully negotiate the difficult and often competing choices that confronted them, another founder suggested only partly in jest that calling Sandhills a school might actually be a misnomer. "It should almost be called a social work project" he admitted. Perhaps because he was an artist, he suggested that many school-based problems were actually manifestations of an American culture that was growing steadily coarser and more unforgiving. An aesthetic outlook seemed increasingly out of place in a world that attributed more value to rigor, competition, and technologically delivered comforts. "We live in an atmosphere that is ready to reward materialism" he remarked. "People have become very selfish, and the word 'community' is bantered about but nobody really believes in it. And teenagers are among the most marginalized groups in society."

This founder underscored the importance of tapping into the natural interests and curiosity of students. The decision to allow students significant input in directing the course of their learning was seen as a more effective way to educate than compelling students to learn exactly what you wanted them to learn and molding them according to whom you wanted them to be. "It's a different way of looking at how you create community and society" he observed. I heard frequent references at Sandhills about teaching students how to interact with society in a manner that would be personally satisfying and jointly beneficial. Excessive individualism was perceived as a threat to

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community building, to the construction of a supportive social network governed by generosity and understanding. "In a grandiose sense" this founder observed, "what we've got to do in this society is begin to think differently about what's really valuable and change our notions about what makes a life a good life."

Somerset

Somerset was built with the good will generated from the founders' earlier success with a community youth enrichment program. Through their proven leadership in organizing outreach activities within the local black community, the Somerset founders had accumulated considerable credibility and social capital. When an opportunity arrived to create a charter school that could take its direction from this same commitment to social and economic self-improvement, the founders' knew they had to give it a try. With their reputation for spearheading effective grassroots initiatives firmly in place, they launched the initiative on solid footing.

For this community burdened by poverty and crime, the opening of Somerset was a bold announcement that conditions were going to improve. It was not by default that this district's first charter school opened in the black section of town. Somerset was a calculated gamble lauded by the founders as a sign of better things to come. For 20 years, the city schools had operated under the dictates of a court-ordered desegregation plan that had only recently expired. Now relieved of that mandate, school leaders shouldered much of the burden of having to make some politically fateful decisions. Regardless of the solutions chosen, there was little chance that these decisions wouldn't leave either the white or black community feeling resentful or betrayed. For as far as Somerset's founders were concerned, there had been unsatisfactory progress in the education of African American students. For many of these students, schooling was still an experience marked by despair and humiliation. The founders hoped that Somerset would introduce a new way of thinking about the purposes and goals of public schools. They were optimistic that what had begun as a discrete effort on their part might one day evolve into a broad-based social movement aimed at making the schools more integral to the social and spiritual life of the entire district.

One of Somerset's founders was an 82 year-old woman who had grown up in this neighborhood just a couple of blocks from where I interviewed her. Her recollections of the Jim Crow South were still vividly etched in her mind. A former teacher, she had traveled around the world studying schools in the underdeveloped countries she visited, and had lived and worked for many years in New York City before retiring to North Carolina. In a sense, Somerset was to be her legacy, her gift in perpetuity to the young people who deserved a brighter future than the one they likely faced. She was appreciative of but undaunted by the scope of the challenge she had taken on. "You have to work hard to bring about a different opinion or way of thinking in people" she informed me. "If you want either the white or black community to think well of you, then you have to do something that people will take a second look at. You just can't be inert. You can't sit like a frog on a leaf. You have to start it yourself."

Yet for all her and the other founders' enthusiasm, they inwardly entertained few illusions about the difficulties they faced in bringing about racial reconciliation in a town shaped by a history of racial politics. They knew that seemingly intractable social problems were customarily handed over to the schools to resolve, and they were fully aware that Somerset was assuming that problematic role. Still, it was too early to conclude that these founders had overestimated the impact a single school could have as a catalyst of change. They refused to believe that concerned members of the public could not be motivated to come together to develop a more generous conception of public schooling, one that did not determine in advance whom the winners and losers would be. This vision coupled with a willingness to engage in a more forthright conversation about the existing culture of education were the true meanings that undergirded Somerset's foundation. As a second founder explained:

> Education must be rooted in some set of values that the educator is attempting to cultivate or nurture in the student. It must be purposeful ... and it must drive the curriculum. Education for the sake of intellectual development alone is worthless. What's more important than our intellectual prowess is our ability to be social beings, that is, the value we place on the group versus just our own individual strengths and skills. What's important in life are the contributions we make to each other. We are part of a collective community and our success depends on the success of others.

Inclusive Leadership

In order to create communities in which the constituents of the charter school respected each other as valued partners, the principals were challenged to elicit norms and practices that would foster such inclusive contexts. The extent to which founders, teachers, staff, families, and students muted their self-interests to collaborate with one another in an egalitarian manner was largely a factor of the school's restructured social, professional, and learning environments. The salient characteristic evinced by the principals was a fierce determination to dislodge the assumptions that continued to lend credibility to models of hierarchical leadership and specious meritocratic systems that seemed especially ill-suited to achieving a more stimulating and empowering organizational culture (Sergiovanni, 1994).

In projecting a series of integrated changes that would cut across all aspects of the school enterprise, the principals displayed their intentions of not only improving the quality of student learning but of making school more of a enriching experience for all community members, regardless of their roles or positions in the organizational structure (Barth, 1990). Notably, these convictions were propelled by belief systems so impelling that they virtually bordered on faith. Each principal capitalized on her school's autonomy to imagine what a restructured school could accomplish now that it was no longer so severely constrained by the conventions imposed by uniform policies and externally mandated goals. In light of such agendas, each principal anticipated that no amount of previous experience would have adequately prepared her for the special demands of leadership in a charter school. Each was cognizant of the risks and responsibilities she had taken on and welcomed the opportunity to match her skills and talent to the array of tasks that lay ahead.

Where the principal had traditionally been situated in the vanguard of the school change process, the leadership paradigm that appeared to be emerging in the study schools suggested instead that if long-term creative change were going to be sustained, it could no longer draw from a single well. Besides being decidedly unegalitarian, it also seemed self-limiting to expect that the principal could or should provide all that was necessary for school redirection of this magnitude. The new thinking that was being entertained in these schools proposed that there was a pool of underutilized talent dispersed across the multiple layers of the school community (Bastian, Fruchter, Gittell, Greer, & Haskins, 1986; Lieberman, 1995). Not tapping into this reservoir was simply foolish and arrogant, a waste of natural resources. Rather than playing it safe by minimalizing the potential risks to their stature as administrative experts, the principals insisted that the skills and knowledge necessary for innovation and leadership were actually more generalized than previously recognized. They indicated that if charter schools had any hopes of operating as effective communities, then this innate capacity for collective participation and self-regulation had to be mined and developed.

Despite individual variations in style and temperament, these three principals (Sandhills operated without a formally designated principal) made it clear that they were less interested in towing community members along behind them than in steering from the center. Instead of unilaterally demanding that their schools move in the direction that they thought best, the principals preferred to enlist volunteers from across the entire organization in helping to identify where the school community desired to go. With the philosophical purposes of the school serving as a critical navigational beacon, once a set of goals had been mutually decided upon then each principal set about charting a course of action that seemed likely to achieve this destination. Important recommendations such as these were not regarded as infallible strategies but as carefully constructed hypotheses, subject to testing by the vagaries of the classroom and the often jumbled social workings of community. When some organizational or curricula aspect didn't pan out as anticipated, the scheme was modified or abandoned and an alternative plan substituted. By committing their schools to a systematic process of trial and error, the principals recognized that neither a charismatic personality nor a well-crafted mission statement would see them through the rough patches that were certain to arise. Insofar as the measure of their effectiveness as school leaders was concerned, what would matter in the end would be their ability to connect the community to the school's vision and then persuasively demonstrate a satisfactory level of results.

From the first stage of this process, the principals began to distance themselves from a detached command and control style of leadership in which the school organization was informed about what needed to happen and compliance was expected of subordinates. In order to accelerate the shift away from authoritative and linear governance structures, the principals understood that they needed to begin thinking more holistically, perceiving of school as an integrated ecological system in which the political organization as well as the academic, social, and moral realms were mutually reinforcing. Each component brought richness and fullness to the school enterprise, contributing to something larger than training of the intellect or improvement through proclamation could ever accomplish by itself. No longer would they permit themselves to see school as simply an amalgam of disparate parts, each capable of being coaxed into performing in optimal fashion in isolation of the others. There was a prevailing attitude that a fragmented and mechanistic view of leadership that reduced patterns of complex social phenomena to a menu of independent variables could not logically serve to stimulate a cohesive school culture. It was urgent that a sense of balance and integrity be restored to the organization, and in the vernacular of the principals the manifestation of this organic quality was strongly associated with community.

In their efforts to elevate their schools above a level of ordinariness, the principals paid close attention to the instrumental role they played in aggregating the flow of symbols and rituals that stitched together the school's particular emerging culture. Threaded through these different outlooks was a common belief that decision making functioned most relevantly when it was made a joint enterprise operating as close to the point of educational delivery as possible. Sarason (1995) affirms this point when he notes that "when you are going to be affected, directly or indirectly, by a decision, you should stand in some relationship to the decision-making process" (p. 7).

In harnessing the forces that converged to shape the educative potential of the school, each principal struggled to make the decision-making process accessible to the scrutiny, inputs, and critique of founders, staff, and parents. This was obviously not the path of least resistance, but it was the path they insisted on for themselves and so they felt obligated to extend this democratic opportunity to all. Community members were encouraged to exercise a critical interest in the school's technical and moral problems and participate in the schoolwide search for solutions. As it turned out, not all parents and staff wanted to be deeply involved on a day-to-day basis in the internal mechanisms of the schools, but they did want to know that their voices would be heard when and if they spoke out. And although argument and debate often opened up the schools to harsh criticism and social antagonisms, there was a quiet hope that in the end some greater and more durable truth would emerge. This movement toward shared autonomy and participatory leadership required all constituents to voluntarily surrender various amounts of status, ambition, or authority in the attempt to bolster the collective capacities of the school. Glickman (1993) notes that to undergo this difficult transformation, "every individual has to lose his or her secure place in the old scheme" (p. 91). Until such schools eventually settle down into a comfortable rhythm, considerable personal and organizational disequilibrium will likely be experienced during the act of acquiring new places within the shifting school terrain.

It was essential for the principals to employ an artful touch in their dealings with colleagues and constituents so that these inclusive contexts would not become dysfunctional sources of conflict. This required an ability to reconcile the demands of the founders without encroaching on the professional judgments of the teachers or treading on the expectations of parents. Each formed an invaluable piece of the whole. Just as principals in traditional public schools often found themselves pitted against the district office on one side and teachers on the other, the charter principals had to mediate the often contradictory demands of founders and teachers, with the extra element of parental involvement added to the mix. The determination of the principals to aggregate multiple perspectives into a coherent mission signaled their overarching desire to establish an internal locus of control for their schools. The primary aim of this formative process was not to render the charter school less visible to the public, but rather as Smith (1998) suggests, to establish charters as trustworthy public institutions whose social and political dispositions are effectively modulated through the consensual stewardship of their members.

Driven by intrinsic concerns, community contains the seeds of a more demanding guardianship over its emerging purposes and traditions than the contrived allegiances enforced by the external moral authority of the state or district. Constituents who are delegated meaningful roles in the operation of a school become jointly accountable for the quality of life enjoyed there. Implicit in the notion of community is the idea that some definition of the common good must be shared by all, and no authentic standard of accountability can be set any higher than this. The principals saw their special place in the shaping of this enterprise and assumed much of the responsibility for promoting the structures and procedures that would create the conditions for collaborative and reflective school practice. Compared to previous assignments, they quickly learned that a major difference of working in a charter school was that they operated without blueprints to guide them or the resources of a central office to fall back on in times of trouble. Furthermore, the practice of inclusive leadership did not obviate their need to contribute specialized skills and knowledge vital to effecting significant educational improvement (Beck & Murphy, 1993). As in any school, process was expected to deliver on certain desired outcomes. Enough pressures abounded in the schools to remind the principals that despite their positions of influence in the organizational matrix, they were not immune to disapproval from founders, teachers, or parents.

There was rarely a day when the excitement of the job was not tempered by its uncertainties. A failure to mobilize support around a binding set of values or reconcile key social and political differences remained constant dangers. The ongoing challenge for leadership settled into a pattern of coaxing organizational clarity out of an environment characterized by turbulence and transformation (Fullan, 1993). This was often an elusive and time-consuming task, since as the study revealed, charter school formation rarely followed a neat linear trajectory. More often than not, the schools traced a more circuitous path, growing incrementally by fits and starts. It became evident to all involved but especially to the principals that the roster of contingencies involved in school transformation could not be sufficiently forecast or manipulated through a science that was heavily dependent on rational planning and the application of ready-made educational nostrums. In each of the study schools, such a level of expertise was seen to function only in the abstract, and the responsibility of leadership was recast as conduct rooted in moral practice directed toward the common good (Foster, 1989).

By and large, schools that function as healthy communities generate their own priorities and instrumental values from within. Rightful administrative action takes it cues from this native ethos, not from imported laws and procedures universally deemed to be true. The claims of some social scientists notwithstanding, a search for the secrets capable of revealing the mechanics of organizational behavior was not lucrative for these principals and they consequently invested little of their energy in it. This is because as Foster suggests, even under optimal conditions, school leadership is probabilistic and deeply contextualized. It is an endemic activity rendered through critique and oriented toward heightened states of awareness, freedom, and equity. So rather than engaging in a sterile technical struggle, the principals I observed set about identifying the barriers that impeded the end values of the school from being met. Their objective, which was not always achieved, was to inform the community about how these obstacles foreclosed on the emergence of excellence and equity. Only then would they propose a strategy in which all interested stakeholders could act in concert to remove them.

Riverview

Sylvia, the principal at Riverview, saw a fundamental need to establish trustworthy lines of communication between school constituents who habitually operated within separate social and educational spheres. From Sylvia's vantage point as principal of a new school, community building consisted of inventing structures of collaboration where none existed and then channeling Riverview's human and material resources in creative and empowering ways.

For instance, Sylvia was determined to enlist parents as more active participants in the education of their children. The starting point for her was the rejection of erroneous assumptions that routinely consigned low-income and minority children to "at-risk" categories. She explained that all too often these children were unjustly branded as underachievers because of a perceived incapacity for ingenuity or wit, which is to say that the cultural knowledge and experiences they brought with them into school were incongruent with the forms that were officially recognized, valued, and tested. With students discounted in this way, it wasn't surprising that their ideas weren't recognized and their voices silenced.

In contrast to this disabling understanding of intelligence, Sylvia sought to foster an alternative school environment that offered students "a respite from being horse-whipped through the regular school curriculum." It infuriated her that students were routinely forced to conform to the categorical placements designated by school bureaucracies and to the learning regimens imposed by standardized curricula and assessments. In seeking a more significant education for students, she was committed to seeing that Riverview made every effort to adapt to the needs and capacities of the child. Her years of working as a special education teacher had convinced her that large, impersonal schools were ill-equipped to educate all children to their full potential:

> These children are frustrated and so they act out. Teachers are frustrated. And that's why it's critical that there be parental support. What was lacking in the schools I worked in was the support of parents of the neediest children. These parents felt intimidated coming into the school, and phone calls to them were often stress calls. As for the parents, they felt helpless about dealing with their child. [All they heard] was the school demanding 'You better do something.'

Sylvia argued that Riverview's mission encompassed a moral obligation to educate parents who were inclined to accept these school judgments as absolutes. Formalistic school environments could be intimidating to parents who may have only a minimal education themselves. She considered it vital to the reconstitution of the school-home relationship that parents be given a context in which they could learn to more fully appreciate the work their child did in school. It was partly for these reasons that each prospective parent was interviewed for 30 minutes prior to enrollment:

> I think there is something powerful at work among these parents. We asked questions like 'How do you see your child as a reader? As a writer? Does your child have any interest in science?' We covered all the content areas in addition to social-emotional development. I was just struck by the ferocity of the parents' desire. They weren't indifferent or detached. They sincerely believed that school could be good for their child if they could just find the right place.

As important as it was to secure dependable parental support, it constituted only one piece of the school improvement puzzle. Because Riverview was a new school busily deciding what its norms and standards should be, there had been something of a crash course in establishing collegial connections, forums for schoolwide dialogue, and an ambient level of trust. Teachers who just days and weeks before knew nothing about one another were thrust into something of a pressure-cooker environment in which they had to quickly figure out how to forge patterns of interaction that recognized each other's professional orientations and styles. With added opportunities for individual lives to converge and commingle, teachers could look forward to the potential of more rewarding personal and professional growth.

Regardless of Riverview's crowded schedule, hectic pace, and emerging tensions, Sylvia never neglected making the teachers an integral part of the school. After hiring the first couple of teachers by herself, she included these first faculty members in the interviewing and hiring of subsequent staff members. Sylvia acted on the belief that the professionals in a school had a tangible stake in the selection of their colleagues, one which demanded their direct involvement. By implementing a cascading hiring system, she was refusing to exempt teachers from sharing in the responsibility for these key decisions. Since Sylvia and the instructional staff were destined to rely on one another, she thought it perfectly appropriate that they collaborate in working out the details of running the school in an egalitarian manner.

In the weeks following the opening of school, Sylvia and the staff spent sufficient time together for her to acquire an abiding respect for their commitments and abilities:

> I have a relatively green staff, so I'm taking something of a chance in giving teachers the freedom to [customize] the curriculum. But they are creative.... Teachers need time to think and plan ... to design what they're going to do with their students and to consult with their peers. All this I've been able to put together in this school. There is an ethic of collegiality here that is amazing. Some days I can't believe that I've had such a wonderful opportunity.

Hickory Ridge

Mary, the principal of Hickory Ridge, expressed a keen appreciation of the need to develop a school community in which the inevitable differences of opinion and outlook could be remediated before they escalated into intractable problems. She worked to have members accept a reasonable level of disagreement as an commonplace ingredient of the social environment, a healthy and even desirable characteristic of a learning community that needn't automatically factionalize the constituents and spell disaster for the emerging school coalition. The instability of the organization during the first few months of school impressed upon Mary how ideological fissures left unattended for too long could harden into permanent scars. Wiser now from having survived some early and disconcerting experiences, when I met her she explicitly stated her determination to create a school culture resilient enough to overcome any future challenges:

> A good education is built upon common ground, a common vision of what a child needs and how the school can come together with the parents to say 'This is what we need to do.' We need to recognize our common vision and understand that there's going to be some deviation from it. But how do we make every child a better citizen in the world of the future? What are the ground rules for that?

Although Mary was not oblivious to the difficulties involved in linking school improvement to the limited resources contained within a small and autonomous community such as Hickory Ridge, she argued against a standardized approach to reform that ran the risk of closing off discussion to all but mainstream ideas and perspectives. After all, she had come to a charter school to escape the unreflective acceptance of prescriptive approaches. Her years as an administrator had taught her that when state or district mandates were universally fitted onto all schools, the goal was to produce outcomes that could be quantified and compared through measurements that had minimal tolerance for alternative treatments. "Charter schools have different ideas about where

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they're headed and how they're going to do it" she noted. "That's what the community is asking for." She described her role as assisting the school in the realization of its goals.

Mary elaborated on some of the interpersonal qualities that Hickory Ridge valued highly enough to be worthy of attention. "We're having to overcome fears that parents have had about going into the district schools" she remarked. "We're slowly picking away at that, but there are parents who have grown up in a system where you just don't visit the school. Schools where you're not welcome and not sought out for your ideas. But we value that here. We can provide that teacher-parent unity." One of Mary's priorities was to dismantle the usually formidable barriers that stood between school and community. She suggested that breaking down those barriers was a crucial first step in bringing families together who did not customarily interact with one another. "If education is to succeed" she said, "then the warmth of families needs an opportunity to spread." If her position as principal fell short of single-handedly empowering her to instill the attitudes and conditions necessary for the creation of a restructured school, she could nonetheless use her influence to facilitate their formation.

The high profile of parents at Hickory Ridge had persuaded Mary to modify her customary leadership style. Where she had started out a little too forcefully for the likes of the community, she ratcheted down her approach to the point where she now consistently solicited parental opinions before making certain kinds of decisions. She explained that although parents did not have the final word in all matters of administration or curriculum, neither were their opinions slighted or ignored. This respect for parental concerns could be traced to the beginning of the school year when groups of parents sat down with the teachers in grade-level meetings to confer about the pedagogical and curricular directions that Hickory Ridge should take.

At the time of my visits, the dynamics of this complicated relationship were still evolving. Mary pointed out that even though the school considered itself a cooperative venture, there were moments when dialogue was strained and compromise hard to reach. She related the story of one parent who stood up at a meeting to remind everyone of the importance of coming to some sort of consensus because they were going to be working together for a long time to come. It was okay to start from positions of difference, this parent commented, but differences eventually had to be reconciled. Mary noted that friction between dissenting parties or groups was not as easy to walk away from in Hickory Ridge as it would be in a traditional school where face-to-face encounters were less common and social relations tended to be preconceived. In Hickory Ridge, few educative dimensions were so tightly circumscribed. Educators and parents regularly tested the limits of policies, programs, and each other. Within this small school, the moral, social, and academic realms frequently collided in discussions that dealt with educational values and priorities.

One philosophical tenet that had a pronounced influence on Mary's educational perspective was captured in her statement that "a part of education is what we learn from each other." As a response to the vicissitudes associated with community building, she looked upon exit from Hickory Ridge as a solution of last resort to the obstacles posed by disagreement. She worked hard to accommodate the needs of every family and recognized how the individualistic aspect of school choice could foreclose on opportunities in which reciprocal learning could occur. Her faith in the power of a participatory and self-regulating learning environment to enrich the character and cognitive development of students and adults led her to regret the loss of such learning opportunities. Mary had more than her own professional interests at heart when she listened to parents express a grievance over some aspect of the school. She appreciated how difficult it was for some parents to publicly express their disappointment, and respected their courage in coming forward. The passions that some parents displayed over educational issues convinced her that the appeal of charter schools was rooted in something larger than simply a common purpose or a setting conducive to individual gain. She suspected that this appeal stemmed from a yearning for connectedness that sought satisfaction in the service of others. "There are people looking for a nice little community for their child to be part of" she observed, "just as they're looking to become part of that community themselves."

Somerset

Linda, the principal at Somerset, insisted that "parents should have a choice and a voice as to the educational process of their children." She believed that magnet and charter schools were a step in the right direction in asserting that certain educational responsibilities be transferred from the state and district authorities and entrusted to parents and individual schools. She thought this realignment was long overdue because it was instrumental to inviting the kind of close relationships that made families feel more connected to and supportive of the work that goes on in school. "I think some parents have just given up and don't have a lot of trust in the public school system anymore" she reported. "Maybe they felt like their needs were not being met or they were unable to communicate their needs well to others. Maybe so many children came to Somerset because the parents felt that in a child-centered school, we would make a concerted effort to improve the educational situation for all students."

Linda thought it important to expand the palette of educational choices available in a district not because having more choices was better or because she believed that schools should directly compete for clients but because children able to thrive in one type of school environment might fare poorly in another. In districts chained to conventional instructional approaches, choice would provide the mechanism through which more creative educational ideas could be disseminated to families in search of alternatives. If districts could be convinced to diversify their offerings and schools responded by adopting one of the particular orientations suggested by these models, then parents would find themselves in a more favorable position to locate a school congruent with their child's social and intellectual needs. But even though Linda encouraged parents to more actively participate in shaping the conditions of their child's education, she acknowledged that a stronger home-school relationship could not eliminate all conflict. She explained that regardless of Somerset's good intentions in hosting open-school nights several times a year, sending regular letters home to keep families abreast of school policies and activities, and issuing invitations to family get-togethers such as picnics, not every curricular or social innovation initiated by the teachers and administrators would be automatically appreciated or understood. Community should not be equated with the total absence of discord, she cautioned.

The troubles brought on by this situation became dramatically clear to the founders and staff at Somerset because the educational implications of the arts-based curriculum had never been thoroughly explained to parents. Whether out of expediency or naivete, the school had built their instructional program around a number of unexamined assumptions that were suddenly demanding attention. When several families discovered that their children were participating in learning activities that conflicted with their religious views and moral conceptions of a good school, they took their objections straight to the founders and to Linda. The failure to construct bridges of understanding between all members of the school community became apparent, and it prompted Linda to take a step back and reassess the demands of leadership:

> If we are to become a totally integrated school, then an extensive amount of staff development needs to be done. The teachers need to continue to gain knowledge and confidence about how to incorporate the arts into the curriculum. But in addition to that is parental awareness. I know we'll get more support if we can help parents to understand an arts curriculum. So it's a matter of educating them as well.... We can do this by inviting them into the school to see a teacher demonstrating an actual lesson. It means doing more performances in the community, putting up art displays around town, and having the children go home and walk their parents through a project they've been working on.

This experience sensitized Linda to any presumptuous or authoritarian behavior on the part of the school that could turn out to be counterproductive to a learning community that valued all stakeholders as agents of change. If shared purposes and goals were to instigate new norms, then Somerset's power relationships had to be restructured to the extent that they make participation

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more accessible to previously disenfranchised constituents. She noted that the management strategies and slender threads of human connection endemic to mainstream public schools were an unwanted inheritance with which Somerset was forced to contend. Many of Somerset's parents had grown accustomed to this efficiency model of education in which they typically interacted with schools in an adversarial fashion or else were made to feel like spectators. Now these regulatory patterns of conduct were hindering Somerset's growth as a community. Previously enculturated habits and dispositions filtering into the school from the outside meant that neither the founders nor Linda could fully cordon off the school from potentially destabilizing influences. If the school were going to move forward, then it was imperative that social, moral, and intellectual boundaries be crossed.

As in Hickory Ridge, the tensions brought on by the convergence of multiple perspectives required that they be acknowledged as a legitimate byproduct of a diverse school culture in the making. It seemed wise not to judge such turbulence as something dangerous to be quelled or managed away. Despite the tensions, Linda never doubted that Somerset's flexibility and capacity for self-direction were assets that would ultimately empower her to fulfill her leadership tasks. But at the same time she worried that a negative concept of freedom perceived as release from public structures of consent might slowly gain a foothold in the school. Only an enlightened discretion operating within a community context could avoid the perils of such isolationism and sustain itself over the long run. "We don't have any history here" Linda exclaimed, "so a lot of effort goes into selling parents and teachers on the idea of the school. I would like us to have a relationship where we feel that we're in this together, where even the children know and feel this. Where we are family, and the bottom line is that we're all here to serve the children and each other."

Congruent Pedagogy

Across each of the schools, the values and ideas of teachers were considered essential to the emergence of a binding moral purpose. When the knowledge and insights of teachers are aggregated into the normative outlook of a school, the impact of community is more likely to engender habits directed toward collective inquiry, self-critique, and the positive reconstruction of the learning environment. Although it is by no means certain that such an outcome will be achieved, a reflective environment is more likely to assert a powerful influence over the way that the values, ideas, and principles of the school get expressed (O'Connor, 1989). Patterns of association and social attachment are formed and reinforced, consolidating into a platform of beliefs and dispositions upon which all policies and actions are predicated. When teachers are listened to and granted significant control over classroom decisions, solidarity as a cultural force in its own right has a greater potential of gaining acceptance as a desirable attribute of community (Barth, 1990).

Dialogical encounters in which the constituents of the school are given opportunities to learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses can lead to a consensus about the terms of discourse within the community. Teachers, founders, the principal, parents, and possibly even students are better situated to recognize the interactive dimensions of their actions and decisions. There is a fateful turn away from any pretense of neutrality toward values and purposes because no school, especially one which espouses a communal ethic, can be indifferent toward issues of caring, social justice, and human dignity. As Bernstein (1992) notes, although the political thrust of a community of inquiry is firmly rooted in a specific cultural context, there is a simultaneous striving to transcend the limitations imposed by contextual borders. Compelled into action by such dynamic conditions, there is a constant yearning to extend the finite reach of the community. The trap of intellectual or cultural provincialism is consciously averted by searching out additional opportunities for learning that will challenge and enlarge those which are immediately at hand. And even though the study schools were still in the initial stages of such growth when I visited them, they at least had voiced the kind of commitments that could further movement in such a direction.

Accordingly, the words and deeds associated with this kind of behavior impact on the still tentative identity of the social organization in ways that go far deeper than mere technical or contractual considerations will allow. What each member says and does affects not just he or she alone but the welfare of everyone else. Isolation and disproportionate levels of influence become increasingly difficult to maintain as reciprocal structures of support fan out to create a network in which the complementary needs of the individual and community are acknowledged as dual priorities. As members acquire sensitivity to these new practices and relationships, the traditional reliance on the principal or the dominant group to act as the moral rudder for the school is sharply diminished. Given the imperatives of a school community engaged in the pursuit of morally responsive self-government, conditions of complexity born of interdependence simply become inescapable social realities (Lieberman, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 1991).

The teachers in the study exhibited varying capacities and inclinations to embrace these new arrangements. The contributions they made to the emerging cultural persuasions of their schools were expressed within a framework of exemplary practice. To varying degrees, this notion implied a form of teaching in which the meanings and goals of the school were recognized as products of individual identity as much as they were molded by the divergent interpretations of the school's central mission as understood by the founders, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. It is claimed that individuals-in-relations comprise the fundamental units of a democratic community (Gould, 1988). As agents of change, individuals are always acting within and through their particular context of social relations. When these relations are kept sufficiently broad and fluid, the enrichment of the individual and the community become more likely. An ecological understanding of community such as this calls for the aggregation of all sociopolitical conditions and attitudes that influence the developmental life of the school. For educators with only limited prior experience in the complexities of merging community ideals with democratic practice, this inclusive and non-hierarchical approach can be difficult to grasp at first. When viewed as competencies to be mastered, honor, respect, and understanding are easily neglected or compromised in educational processes that seek to be transformative. It was not surprising then that for the study teachers, the innate tensions and competing claims that existed between the commitments to individual growth and self-determination on the one hand and the ethos of community embedded within the democratic ideal on the other were not always successfully reconciled (Goodman, 1989).

Although the teachers articulated personally tailored versions of a communal ethic of care and responsibility, they did not indicate equal levels of confidence in stepping beyond the knowledge and comfort of their own cultural narratives and ingrained loyalties. Immersion in their experientially constructed identities and perceptions served as structures of stability that inhibited them from wholeheartedly embracing new conceptions of power and privilege. Ladson-Billings (1994) observes how a pedagogy of racial and ethnic relevance empowers African-American students to sustain a positive cultural identity amid an often hostile society in which the dominant cultural tradition is different from their own. But for the teachers in this study who got swept up in the discontinuous social currents flowing through their schools, their initial hesitancy at reconstruction was actually more an issue of uncertainty. Exacerbating their ambivalence was the fact that the demands of pluralism failed to point in a distinct direction on which all stakeholders could readily agree.

The demarcation between personal and public politics began to blur as soon as community was projected outward from the self and onto the group. In the absence of cohesion brought on by this indeterminate situation, clarity was in scarce supply and what at first sight appeared to be the confusions of community was actually a dynamic reconstitution of social and political relationships. These emerging configurations stemmed from what Greene (1993) describes as "concrete engagements ... with persons, young persons and older persons, some suffering from exclusion, some from powerlessness, some from poverty, some from ignorance, some from boredom" (p. 13). Still others represented an altogether contrasting set of attributes. The point is that no single set of explanatory factors satisfactorily captured the redistribution of norms and attitudes in which these shifting school settings were engaged. When teachers attempted to steady themselves by reaching for the center, like others in the school, they discovered to their dismay how few of the old deeply-held assumptions about school organization and practice remained.

Because the teachers brought vastly different experiences and persuasions into this sociopolitical exchange, the distinct voice of each teacher was forged both in relation and opposition to each of the other voices circulating in the school. Cultures that enjoyed unequal status outside of school struggled to find equal representation inside the school. The fact that some of the teachers came from mainstream backgrounds while others did not created an immediate need for strategies that acknowledged students, parents, and colleagues in just and compassionate ways. The search for a more democratic center implied a commitment to inclusion that would unite the diverse perspectives, experiences, and contributions of all members of the community. In their struggle to convert the moral and philosophical abstractions of the schools' foundational purposes into valid learning structures and practices that were intelligible to everyday understandings, the teachers sensed that as they worked to improve the lives of their students the shape of their own lives would be irrevocably altered as well. This realization served as a source of exhilaration, vigilance, or both, and it brought teachers into direct contact with conceptions of excellence that worked to stretch them in ways they had not fully imagined before.

Riverview

Riverview displayed a high degree of congruence between the values anchoring the teachers' belief systems about teaching and learning and the emergent culture of the school. Although various disagreements inevitably arose that generated tension for the community, these conflicts never escalated into fractious dispute. Riverview's approach to school organization suggested that favorable conditions for the growth of a coherent community may depend less on ironing out every wrinkle beforehand than on establishing effective mechanisms in which differences and incongruities are communicated and resolved before they have a chance to metastasize into insurmountable grievances.

For example, a third grader teacher cautioned about the care with which teachers needed to be selected in order to keep the goals of the school consistent. "If we start out saying we want to do a certain thing then we need to stick to it" she insisted. After years of teaching in schools populated with indifferent administrators and faculty, this teacher had embarked upon a dedicated search to locate a school that would be compatible with her educational beliefs and interests. She hadn't just passively submitted to being interviewed by the founders and principal as to whether she fit their criteria of acceptability; she questioned them in kind to ascertain if the school measured up to the standards that she held in high regard :

> When I spoke with [a founder], her ideas and values were the same as mine. So I came in knowing that the staff, administration, and board members could constantly remind each other of what we had originally said. We all agreed on certain things, such as the school would do anything to help children learn, and the teachers would be listened to but not told what to do. If we don't agree on how to achieve our goals then we can discuss it and come up with a workable compromise. If we can remember this and call each other on what we have said, it can make a difference.

Although a strong collegial atmosphere pervaded the school, this did not mean that the teachers responded in similar ways to the challenges they confronted. The combined first- and second-grade teacher took great pride in being an integral member of a start-up school, yet her excitement was tempered by doubts as to whether she could provide her students with enough of the personalized attention they required. As she got to know her students and her concern for them deepened, she saw how much more needed to be done that she had neither time nor resources to provide. She had become somewhat distressed at the thought of depriving them of the educational "justice" she felt they deserved. Even though there were only about 16 students in the class, it was not uncommon for her to feel overwhelmed by their wide range of learning needs. "I have a lot of behaviors in my class," she explained, "some of which are true behavior problems, so I have to concentrate on that. And I have several students who can't count, who can't one-to-one correspond. On the other hand, I have one girl who is ready to multiply and everything in between."

These dilemmas of practice undermined her confidence and caused her to seriously question her professional adequacy as a teacher. She confided that she had arrived at a point where she had to continually stave off doubts as to whether she could adequately fulfill the educational objectives outlined in Riverview's charter:

> I feel a big responsibility being a primary teacher, because I'm setting down the tracks for the rest of their education. I have a class full of black kids, and because I'm white, I can't be a role model for them in that sense. But it doesn't seem to matter to them and so it doesn't bother me. My kids and I are learning things together like acceptance. I'm female, I'm not from the neighborhood, but they love me just as much. This is where the school is located and so it's all part of working out the fit.

One of the third-grade teachers told of being attracted to Riverview because of its strong focus on cooperation and teamwork. Riverview's small size made it possible for the teachers to interact closely with one another in terms of planning, curriculum, and instructional design. Furthermore, the intimacy of the setting allowed them to become acquainted with all the students, not just those in their classes. They knew each student by name, and often a little bit about their background. When parents visited the school, they frequently recognized them as well. Because the hiring process had ensured that the teachers would approach curriculum and instruction in compatible ways, there was an easy level of cooperation among the staff. By regularly pooling their materials, ideas, and techniques, the teachers were able to circumvent some of the extremes of isolation that typically prevented schools from cultivating norms of interdependence. For instance, Riverview's collaborative school culture provided the necessary reinforcement for this teacher to exhort her students to take more interest in their studies. Because she knew that the other teachers were urging their students to do the same, this teacher worked harder than she otherwise might have to make students more conscious of their performance in school. It was better when students heard a consistent message, she said. She was convinced that more often than not, students would "rise to the occasion" if they could be meaningfully engaged within a cooperative classroom that was not competitively structured. This meant respecting the students for who they were and not trying to fit them into preconceived notions of what all students should know and be able to do. "You can't be rigid and be a good educator" she stated. "The two don't go together. If you're inflexible then you're going to be miserable. You need to be able to look at a student's needs and make the necessary adjustments."

Yet for all her enthusiasm, she was not without misgivings. She thought the board of directors needed to be more insistent that parents fulfill their obligation to volunteer 3 hours a month in the school. And having meaningful input in the decision-making process meant that teaching at Riverview entailed even more work and longer days than she had originally anticipated. There were times, she explained, when she just felt overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. For instance, the portfolio assessment procedures required continuous updating, and Riverview's policy not to express student academic progress as a single number or letter grade meant that quarterly report cards were narratively written, a gratifying but labor-intensive task. It seemed that the everyday reality of teaching in a charter school was freighted with drawbacks as well as rewards. "We're with our class 7 1/2 hours a day, usually without a break" she exclaimed. "That's rough. If parents want me to be the best teacher I can be, then I must have more planning time."

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Hickory Ridge

Hickory Ridge was perhaps the most effective of the study schools in projecting a clear and consistent framework for apprehending the rationale behind its educational approach. Teachers were able to discern a somewhat fuller picture of what the school was striving to accomplish. This clarity probably benefited from the implementation of the Core Knowledge curriculum which came with an identity structure and philosophical outlook already in place. Because the ideological parameters of the curriculum were largely predetermined, the teachers' start-up tasks were relatively straightforward: unpack the program and become familiar with its specific features. This enabled them to devote more attention to pedagogical issues rather than parceling out their time between content, purpose, and instruction. With such an obvious head start over the other study schools that chose not to employ prepackaged curricula, Hickory Ridge had the appearance of being firmly in control, a situation that wasn't entirely accurate. Through the use of ready-made materials, Hickory Ridge gained some limited educational momentum that initially diverted attention away from the expected problems associated with creating a new school.

"I was pretty laid back when I started here" said the fourth-grade teacher who came out of voluntary retirement because of the opportunity to teach at Hickory Ridge. "But I didn't come in here with the attitude that I would leave if they didn't make me happy. I came with the attitude ... that I would do everything in my power to make it work." At Hickory Ridge she found a school that mirrored her values and and educational goals: respect for individualistic teaching styles; a content-based curriculum with explicit standards for assessment; and a firm discipline code. Like the founders, she believed that mastery of a structured body of knowledge provided students with the building blocks to comprehend and utilize broad concepts that served as the common currency of American society. She decried such "misguided" approaches as open education and progressively oriented schools that focused on teaching students how to learn rather than concentrating on what students needed to know and be able to do. She found Hickory Ridge to be a gratifying return to the "old-fashioned, sit-down, shut-up, and listen to the teacher" kind of school that she attended as a child in which students were taught "something worth knowing."

The affinity of the sixth-grade teacher for the tenets espoused by Hickory Ridge was equally powerful. She claimed that when she compared her attitudes and beliefs with those of the school, there was almost a "word for word" correspondence. Assimilation into the evolving culture of the school had never been an issue for her because from the moment she interviewed for the job with Mary, the principal, and one of the founders, there had been an instantaneous rapport. Over time, as she learned more about the aims of Hickory Ridge and their resemblance to other Core Knowledge-schools, she became thoroughly convinced that she had made the right choice. The other schools she had taught in simply paled in comparison to Hickory Ridge. "I knew this was going to be a happy marriage" she proclaimed. "I love it. It's a whole different view on things."

In her classroom, she immersed herself in devising stimulating ways to weave the humanities, arts, and sciences into a coherent educational fabric. "All life interconnects" she told me. "If I can connect geometry with art, music, literature, and science, then it will be more interesting for the students and a heck of a lot more interesting for me. And I'm building in philosophy, too" she noted, "ways of looking at things using concepts, abstractions, and concretisms. I'm inserting these things constantly. My broad-based background enables me to draw from many fields." Whereas she found teaching at Hickory Ridge to be personally and professionally satisfying, she cautioned that teachers desiring a less demanding environment in which to practice their craft should think twice before accepting a position in a charter school:

> Anyone going into a charter school is putting their whole professional life on the line. [Hickory Ridge] could go bottom up. I would not have a job, and it would be hard to backtrack and apply for a job in a regular public school after being here. But I decided I had to take the chance, instead of wondering 'What if?' These doubts would dog my steps and I didn't want that to happen. So I'm playing it for all it's worth.

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Three of the four teachers I interviewed at Hickory Ridge conveyed the impression of being ethically attuned to the human, social, and intellectual purposes of the school. Inconsistencies in their attitudes toward policies and practices appeared to be minor in scope, requiring only modest adjustments on the part of the school or themselves to develop greater harmony. In contrast, the fifth-grade teacher entertained serious doubts over the extent to which she understood and concurred with the school's educational doctrine. In a Core Knowledge school where the acquisition of prescribed skills and knowledge was highly regarded, she wondered about the fates of students whose existing knowledge and ways of constructing meaning deviated from the expectations written into the curriculum:

> We have this great vision where every child is going to learn to read and write and become a better citizen, and while these are important to me, I'm not really clear on what the school's goals and beliefs are. When I say Core Knowledge curriculum, to me that means facts. But then I hear from the principal and the parents that they want to teach all these skills and I become confused as to what the actual focus is. With skills, it doesn't matter so much what you read or what math problems you work on. It doesn't matter, for example, whether you read Tom Sawyer or Goosebumps books. But the Core Knowledge guidelines say these choices do matter, so I don't really understand what this school stands for.

Sandhills

From the opening day of school, Sandhills found itself embroiled in one controversial issue after another, and nowhere was this turmoil more evident than in the attitudes and orientations of the teachers. Just as the founders, parents, and students struggled to assert their aims and authority in the school, so did the teachers. Tensions ran high during the weeks I was at the site. The responses of these groups to the dyspeptic brew of power politics and competing visions were often at such cross-purposes that they drained away significant amounts of the school's vitality along with any hope of identifying the common good. The opportunity I had to gaze into the inner workings of this school made it patently clear that even the best of intentions offered no guarantee that the structures allowing for the growth of democratic ideas and practices would take root. Democracy is a dynamic process whose enabling conditions are extremely difficult to control. Sandhills provided a graphic example of what can happen when a community is rhetorically committed to the fruits of democracy but unprepared for the flesh-and-blood realities.

The science teacher began the year in a buoyant mood, excited by the prospect that Sandhills would be a radically different experience for him than the dismal teaching assignment he had endured the previous year. Sandhills' moral and political persuasion convinced him that the school's small size would foster a climate in which student anonymity would be dispelled. In this reconstituted teacher-student relationship, the teachers would collaborate as a team to educate the individual student within a communal context marked by multiple access points for learning. These access points would in turn lead students down any number of avenues in which they could experience success:

> I've always been interested in the creative side of things, so I thought that [Sandhills] would be more suited to who I am. I didn't like high school as a student, and I don't like the traditional high school as a teacher either. I don't care for the extreme kinds of rules and hypocrisy that go on. I empathize with a lot of the students here, but that doesn't mean I agree with the whole school or its tone. For example, it's overwhelming to think about student portfolios--how we're going to evaluate them and what the performance criteria will be--and no one has any idea when we'll get around to them. Last year I was working non-stop also, but I wasn't forging new ground. If I were doing well everything that I'm supposed to be doing, I'd already be overworked.

A fragmented attitude toward the school and its goals seemed to be the modal state of mind for the teachers. The English teacher appreciated the potential locked up in the school even though most of what she had experienced so far fell far short of her expectations. Whereas her first impression of the school had been overwhelmingly favorable, by the time of my interview she was contemplating whether to resign during the winter holiday. Although some minor policy improvements had recently been implemented, she felt devalued as a professional and a community member because most of the major decisions remained in the hands of the board of directors and a few individuals sitting on key committees. In the hope of keeping power from becoming concentrated in the hands of an excessively influential individual or group, Sandhills' charter specified that the school was to operate without a formally designated principal. She had interpreted this preference to mean that the management of the school would be a collective responsibility, and felt betrayed when events proved otherwise.

Interpreted in this light, some of this teacher's criticism seemed wholly warranted while some of it sounded unduly harsh. Although it was true that the founders had grossly underestimated the complexity of running a school like Sandhills, my findings suggested that their miscalculation was due to inexperience rather than duplicity. The founders acknowledged the error of their ways and worked hard to ensure that similar mistakes did not recur. Proclaiming that their primary allegiance had always been to the general welfare of the students and the school, they regretted past decisions in which they had disregarded the interests of the teachers. The glaring need for competent leadership had simply created a power imbalance which they had tried to manage to the best of their abilities. With the lessons of those experiences under their belts, they were ready to make amends and move forward with the development of the school if the teachers would only throw their whole-hearted support behind them.

Still smarting and wary of fully trusting the founders, this teacher also directed some rather pointed criticisms at her colleagues. Whereas she had five years of teaching experience, most of the staff were novices in their first or second year. In an environment marred by animosity and suspicion, a couple of teachers had resigned and the rest had withdrawn into the refuge of the classroom until the worst of the troubles subsided. Stung by the community's petty quarrels and arrogant disregard for democratic protocol, she could not accept the reticence of the other teachers over what she considered to be unprofessional and degrading treatment. She urged them to speak out in their own defense and for the sake of those students whose voices were barely heard. But in the end she failed to mobilize her colleagues, succeeding mostly in undermining what remained of her professional authority. The staff members who believed she behaved disloyally painted her as a troublemaker. When I interviewed her, she was unwilling or unable to contain her hurt and resentment:

> Even if you don't know how to teach, at least you need to be open and understanding of the fact that there are certain things that are a part of teaching that are frustrating but which have to be dealt with. And if you're not ready to deal with them then you don't need to be teaching, and you don't need to be in this school because you're not going to be a benefit to the kids or yourself. You're just going to be a hindrance because you're going to feel uncomfortable and you're going to wind up blaming the kids and that's the last thing that they need.

The cultural studies teacher also started working at Sandhills convinced that she had found a kindred spirit in the school. In the weeks prior to the opening of school, she had little cause for apprehension. But she saw the early promise of her "gorgeous opportunity" began to slip away as soon as Sandhills became mired in controversy. In regard to what she referred to as the "hidden ethos" of the school, it did not take her long to figure out how her own perspective on teaching diverged from that of the main founder. An admirer of Glasser's (1986) educational theories, the founder proposed to the Sandhills community that young people are motivated by four essential needs: fun, freedom, control, and love. Sandhills was loosely structured around the premise that certain conditions were prior to learning. The founder asserted that if these four motivating needs could be satisfied, it was reasonable to expect that learning would proceed in a natural and uninhibited manner.

"Well, I pretty much reject that" this teacher told me without equivocation. "If I have to work inside that paradigm, then I would say [to students] that if what you want from life is fun, freedom, control, and love, then learning will get you those things and not necessarily the other way around." She explained that for many of the students who found their way to Sandhills, a traditional public school education was no longer an option. The high schools in town had exhausted every known strategy trying to engage these students in school. "They are here or nowhere" she said. "Of course their parents are going to try to make this work, and the kids will say it's great here even if it isn't because where else are they going to go? They're disenfranchised; they have no other choices." She suggested that educators and policy makers needed to look beyond the schoolhouse walls if they were intent on understanding why so many students were socially isolated and disinclined toward academic learning. She discussed the implications of such an investigation for restructuring the learning environment of the classroom and school:

> If intimacy, competency, and mastery are the driving needs of young people, then we better get some stuff that they can wrap their brains and hearts around. We better engage them in a fairly systematic curriculum where they can find an increasing amount of competence and mastery and develop a better relationship with the teacher, the information, and the other students. I tend to say that the crux of the school is relational. Once we get the students into a relationship with the material and with one another, then the material itself will begin to push back and provide some intimacy just like a person would.

Had it not been for the powerful emotional ties forged with her students, this teacher would have resigned some time ago. But as the situation now presented itself, she didn't feel free to simply pack up her things and leave. For her and for her students, there was no acceptable way to escape the social entanglements of school. It was only after great deliberation that she had decided to take this job at Sandhills, and she didn't appreciate being chased out now by a dysfunctional school culture that might still be repaired. Besides, the keen sense of loyalty and obligation she felt toward her students trumped any grievances she still had with the founders and school community. She had larger interests to consider that emanated from a spiritual connection to lives other than her own. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages associated with leaving, she decided to remain at Sandhills and do her best at leveraging for change from the inside out.

Somerset

As did Sandhills, Somerset also emerged as a school reeling from profound disequilibrium. The crisis generated by this situation negatively affected the attitudes and activities of several teachers. Because the introduction of a new school or program is invariably accompanied by risk, innovation also entails the mobilization of sufficient resources and supports to limit the disruption so that balance is maintained throughout the system. At Somerset, progress toward stabilization was not proceeding smoothly and the rumblings of discord were evident at every turn. The origin of the conflict was traceable not to a single factor but to multiple issues such as divided governance, ambiguous purposes, and the exclusion of teachers from active participation in deciding the school's ways and means. Because they were deprived of the opportunity to develop a fully-fledged sense of ownership for the school, teachers began to feel increasingly peripheral to the community-building process. As time passed this estrangement deepened until the teachers became effectively disassociated from the board of directors with whom they disagreed. Eventually this ideological wall of separation devolved into insult and personal attacks. Perhaps as a way of compensating for past injuries, several teachers responded by fashioning curricular and instructional agendas that reflected their own cherished values and the collective vision they held for the school. These teachers finally reached a breaking point where it was unacceptable to yield to values and purposes that violated their integrity as practitioners. Although their countermeasures restored a sense of efficacy and self-esteem to their professional lives, these were stop-gap efforts that in the long-term further undermined efforts at establishing a common identity and a coherent ethical mandate for the school.

Just how far Somerset's relationship with its teachers had deteriorated was indicated by a first grade teacher who sanguinely arrived at Somerset feeling that she was "perfect for the school and the school was perfect for me." She was attracted by the integrated curriculum, the emphasis on whole-language development, and the autonomy to marshal her talents to teach as she saw fit. But this honeymoon period proved short-lived. A growing list of academic and instructional restrictions were gradually imposed on the teachers by the governing board who wanted to bring content and pedagogy in line with their preferences. These directives bypassed almost any attempt at participatory decision making as they traveled down a hierarchical chain of command. Compliance was simply expected, with little or no discussion about alternatives or compromise. "I'm on the curriculum committee" this teacher explained, "but we've never met yet, so I don't feel like I've been allowed to share my input." She could cope with her indignation at being relegated to a subordinate role but this authoritarian approach to school policies and community cohesiveness had begun to take a toll on the students. The unilateral actions of the board established the terms of the conflict, intensifying her anger and making her keenly aware of the larger issues that were at stake. "Every time I turn around the board is changing something" she complained. "You don't ever know which way is up. And the founders wonder why discipline is so bad. It's because the kids sense it. They can tell when you don't really know what's going on."

She described a situation in which a tangled communication stream and competing lines of authority struggled to coexist--one administrative and the other professional. Because school purposes, roles, and power relationships had never been adequately clarified, this dual authority structure pushed Somerset in contrary directions. The more teachers allied themselves with the principal, the more adamant the founders became about not surrendering their original vision for the school, a vision that included a pronounced focus on Afrocentric traditions such as language, song, and storytelling. For this white teacher, the issue of identity politics posed an immediate threat to the cultural fabric of the school:

> Just before intercession we had these special black heritage classes where the executive director came to teach. She was teaching stuff about Africa, which included some geography. But when she told the group of 60 kids that this was their heritage, that this would help them to understand who they were, and you've got 5 white and 7 Hispanic children in this population, I don't care how small the numbers, you don't tell them that their heritage is black.... I know I'm working with 98% black children, but I don't feel that I should be forced to display all this black heritage. Everything black, black, black. It's not fair to the others. To me, it keeps segregation alive. I'm here to teach academics, teach them how to behave in a socially acceptable manner, and we can do that by touching on every culture.

The friction generated by the struggle over an Afrocentric sensibility on the one hand and a multicultural temperament on the other was confirmed by the fifth-grade teacher. She believed the founders' commitment to a strong African-American presence in the curriculum had likely been responsible for driving away most of the white families who had originally enrolled at Somerset. As a black woman, she personally had no objections to giving African American history and culture a more prominent place in the curriculum. After all, in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, the African American sense of place in the sprawling American narrative received little more than superficial recognition. Yet, given Somerset's mixed enrollment, this teacher thought that the founders had exercised poor judgment. It was important to engage students in activities that included everyone, she said. The history of racial injustice certainly needed to be told, but not at the expense of students who came from different backgrounds. Somerset needed to prepare students for life in an increasingly diverse society. It was a mistake to elevate one cultural identity over another simply because of one's own affiliation. She found such an approach misguided because it circumvented the linked cultural knowledge that these students would need as they made their way in the world.

She emphasized that neither the teachers nor the principal supported the position of the board on this issue. "We need to teach a multicultural curriculum" she stated, "so that we can celebrate the culture of every child and family represented in this school." Part of her commitment included advocating for the school to hire someone qualified to teach English as a Second Language. "I get offended when I hear someone say 'Well, everyone needs to know how to speak English'" she told me. "Well, it just doesn't work that way. I've tried to learn how to speak Spanish and I haven't accomplished it yet. If I'm frustrated trying to learn a new language, I know our Hispanic students are just as frustrated trying to learn English."

She applied this principle of multiple viewpoints and multiple sources of knowledge to the unanticipated collision between Somerset's art-based curriculum and the Christian conservatism of the insular school population. For many parents and students, some of the arts-based themes and activities proved too permissive for their fundamentalist values. As did several other teachers, this teacher freely invited students to cross inherited intellectual, social, and moral boundaries by expressing themselves through the arts, a Rubicon that certain parents clearly wanted left uncrossed. She had been advised by the principal to be less provocative in her teaching, a compromise she reluctantly accepted. As with the issue of race, she once again confronted a situation in which her ethical standards in regard to teaching and learning were called to the fore. "I have no problem teaching poems and literature that bring up religious doubts or racially explicit language in an effort to teach" she explained. "If there is a word or belief that does not correspond with a student's belief, then I want that child to think about it ... and come at it from another point of view."

These same conflicting forces of cultural homogeneity and cultural transcendence also pulled on the sixth-grade teacher. As a white liberal, he found himself stranded in a kind of epistemological no-man's-land, forced to reconcile the values and beliefs of the founders and parents on one side with the need to remain faithful to the demands of his own ethical practice on the other. He explained that he had several students for whom religion was the dominant moral construct shaping their lives. "They will stand up in class and tell me that they do not want to talk about dinosaurs because their mothers told them that God did not make them" he said with exasperation. "And I have some students who will run adamantly from a dance class because their parents have told them that God doesn't allow dancing." The upshot, he sardonically noted, was that he was free to explain other belief systems to his students "as long as they are Christian." Parents, he explained, were apparently willing to accept the methods and objectives of the arts-based curriculum so long as their children continued to believe the absolute truths they had been brought up to believe. When all was said and done, their core moral commitments must remain intact, a proposition he found educationally absurd. "Education is supposed to make you mad" he insisted. "If you don't get upset with me, and if you don't wonder about things in new ways and question your own reasoning, then I haven't done my job. I want to see you get mad because you realize that something is not right."

The more constrained his agency as a teacher became, the more disconsolate he grew. He shrugged off social and cultural conditions that he perceived as beyond his control. In seeking to protect his relationship with students as an inviolable series of transactions between teacher and learner, he attempted to make his classroom a more private space. He tried to dispel the turbulence that swirled inside Somerset by invoking the pragmatic truths he learned in his past:

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> I grew up in Pine Hill working on a farm with my black friends. When we finally did integrate, it was no big deal. We didn't have race problems. We didn't elect a black homecoming queen and a white homecoming queen. We were just friends, and that's the way I've always seen this part of North Carolina. [The fifth grade teacher] doesn't look at me as this white man and I don't look at her as this black lady. We're friends. And I don't say this in order to make it sound good; it's just the way it is. And I don't look at my students as black students. When I talk to my friends I don't say 'My class is 99% black.' I say 'My students.' So I don't care if another white person ever sets foot in here. I just want students who need me. But I need them just as much because teaching is the only thing I know how to do.

Conclusions

The four cases offer insights into some of the ways that charter schools wrestle with the dynamics of reconstructing schooling within a situated notion of community. Across the three levels of school organization looked at in the study, there emerged a continuum of purposes, values, and beliefs. To lesser or greater extents, the founders', principals', and teachers' understandings of the school's moral and intellectual orders did not automatically coincide. By declaring its special needs and interests, each school attempted to attract a population dedicated to a common vision, yet congruence in these matters was not always obtained. Within schools, agreement and consent over means and ends were far from universal. For instance, while shared social concerns, political orientations, and educational meanings tended to be closely attuned at Riverview and Hickory Ridge, at Sandhills and Somerset these qualities were strikingly misaligned. This finding confounds a popular perception of charter schools as normatively coherent learning communities whose members are unified around a set of implicitly shared values and goals. The erroneous image of a charter school hanging out its shingle and attracting only those families and practitioners who fully comprehend its educational iconography and moral meanings appears to be a facile explanation of a multilayered and arcane process. This reductionist notion ignores the harder truth that achieving authentic community in school entails much more than filtering out potentially dissonant elements. It is an infinitely more complex endeavor than simply brandishing the label. Choosing to call a school a community in no way implies that it is one.

Schools are products of multiple choices, and different people can be attracted to or repulsed by the same school for unrelated or unpredictable reasons. The educational landscape of students comprises not just the technical aspects of curriculum, instructional delivery, assessment, standards, and school management. Student learning is also shaped by social relations, authority structures, policy questions and answers, conceptions of virtue, and the ethical ideals held by educators, families, and students with whom they have direct and indirect contact. Thus, a purely rationalistic and goal-oriented view of school choice grossly overestimates the capacity of the mechanism to extend learning opportunities equitably in all directions and to serve as a seed bed for the efflorescence of moral community (Wells & Crain, 1992, 1997). This assertion is not intended to imply that charter schools are incapable of creating caring and harmonious school cultures that are socially and educationally defensible. On the contrary, it mainly calls into question the assumption that declaring a school a community is synonymous with the actual embodiment of congruent value structures and transcendent moral commitments. The experience of community extends far deeper and its attributes more entwined than the unexamined assumptions contained in any purely rhetorical claim. Moreover, the attainment of community is a dynamic cultural process involving inclusion, negotiation, critical reflection, and relationship building. It cannot be regulated, specified, or systematically imposed.

The cultural and political value conflicts introduced through the creation of self-regulating learning environments explains in part why public school systems have resisted taking a more active role in creating substantive choice options for their various publics. The control of schools is a fundamental concern in a democratic society, and government-operated school systems cling to historic precedent in asserting themselves as the legitimate sources of authority for determining how and what will be taught in the nation's public schools. By fending off all contenders, state and district systems have evolved into arbiters of the public good, coercive networks bound together by procedural connections instead of locally constituted norms which would be more likely to affirm the power of community in educational decision making. Kahne (1996) critiques this historical phenomenon from a policy perspective in which he unpacks the values and interests that undergird the dominant culture of mainstream policy making. He finds that humanistic and democratic-communitarian rationales seldom attain prominence in educational policy discussions. Instead, these discussions focus disproportionately on utilitarian and rights-based conceptions of justice, equity, efficiency, and excellence. These approaches rarely call for examining the ways in which the exercise of these rights and entitlements are carried out, and this neglect has the cumulative effect of foreclosing on a more inclusive discourse that might introduce contrary but edifying notions relating to political and intellectual freedom.

Grant (1988) spells out the organizational and ethical priorities that undergird this pervasive model of school reform and policy making:

> The dominant values of the moral order of the typical public school came to be more legal-bureaucratic, individualistic, and technicist. It was a legal-bureaucratic world in its reliance on written rules within a centralized administrative hierarchy, and in its formalism, impersonality, and emphasis on legal due process. It was individualistic in its accent on freedom of choice in intellectual and moral realms, and its avoidance of imposing any but minimal ideals guiding conduct or character development. It was technicist in its assumption that there were technical solutions to most problems.... (pp. 182 - 183).

The gist of these arguments is that they conspire to reduce education and public schooling to little more than a property right. Students are invited to demonstrate their independent value as citizens-in-the-making through ownership and status attainment as symbolized by the accumulation of course credits and other dubious educational credentials but not as members of a wider polity.

In spite of these obstacles, a window of opportunity exists for charter school advocates to construct communally organized schools that draw educators and families together to develop an ethical vision and purpose. The current political climate in North Carolina's legislature and among cooperative school officials appears to be modestly supportive of educators who express an interest in restructuring their schools. Of course, the generosity of this invitation should not be overestimated. In lieu of opting out for the autonomy of a charter school, educators are required to tailor their reform efforts so that they fit comfortably within the codes and patterns of the existing system, ensuring continuing waves of reform that stop short of transformation (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Nothing can be undertaken that threatens to topple the ruling ideology, disrupt the dominant culture, or dismantle the entrenched administrative and political infrastructure.

Ironically, this peculiar impetus for reform comes at a time when curricular standardization and high-stakes testing is sharply on the rise in North Carolina and elsewhere. As schools are held increasingly accountable to narrowly conceived content and performance standards, they are treated like intellectual hostages of national political and economic agendas (Clinchy, 1997; Miller, 1997). Furthermore, this reform rhetoric also appears during an era when racial and ethnic concerns are encountering stiff resistance in state legislatures and policy making circles (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995; Walsh, 1996). As resource inequities and cultural distinctions between urban and suburban schools continue to grow wider and more odious, social promotions are being phased out in the state (Simmons, 1999a) and even Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (1971), which once called for remedial action in order to achieve a unitary, nonracialized system, has been the recipient of a controversial judicial review (Simmons, 1999b).

These philosophical dilemmas and contradictions in regard to determining the optimal balance between local control and centralized authority and between renewing or rescinding public schooling's commitment to educational and social change are nothing new and show no signs of abating anytime soon (Arons, 1997; Gutman, 1987; McNeil, 1986). The gulf between the promise and reality of schooling remains unconscionably stark for many educators, students, and communities. How well North Carolina's recent foray into strengthening standards and accountability integrates with other school reform efforts such as site-based management, teacher empowerment, greater parental involvement, and closer school-community linkages remains in question. And now that charter schools have been added to the mix, the extent to which these new schools will embrace the principles of democratic education is an equally valid concern because the charter mandate leaves the ultimate ends of education wide open. It is more than a little revealing that in North Carolina's expansive charter school law, the word "democracy" fails to appear.

Uncoupling Charter Schools

The act of uncoupling charter schools from systemic controls and allowing them to operate independently of local boards of education should not be an occasion for individuals motivated by possessive self-interest to simply focus on their own idiosyncratic needs in the midst of others (Wuthnow, 1994). And neither should it be license to assemble a group of privately-oriented individuals whose principal point of commonality is that they have each rejected other forms of education (Everhart, 1993). In both these cases, social relationships are construed as contrivances whose instrumental purposes are ultimately self-serving. Within such a value framework, human association in school is radically shaped by extrinsic goals that posit higher levels of individual learning and productivity as the supreme ends of education.

When it is scrutinized more closely, the grant of greater autonomy enjoyed by charter schools should not signify the satisfactory completion of a discrete social transaction. Instead, it might be beneficial to construe autonomy as a public trust that when properly deployed should tend toward the creation of more humanly responsive educational environments (Starratt, 1991). In a democratic school community, the circle of relationships is never closed or privatized. In fact, just the opposite occurs. The school is conspicuously opened-up so that the members of the group are less restricted in their ability to share with and receive from others the challenges posed by unfamiliar ideas, new experiences, and tentative forms of knowledge. Embedded in such an social context, personhood is not configured to be an egoistic function directed toward self-absorption. Differentiated experiences and understandings of the world become the lenses through which larger inclusive experiences and perspectives are explored. A person becomes whole not through the exercise of individualistic choice but through sustained interaction with other human beings in which knowledge and liberty are continually tested and defined by all.

What this suggests is that charter schools can claim only meager legitimacy as instruments designed to consolidate the needs and interests of individuals bent on maximizing their social and political advantages. When individual aggrandizement is accorded higher worth than the mediating social structures that imbue the individual with cultural purpose and historical continuity, an unbalanced situation develops in which society is reduced to "little more than a stage upon which individuals 'act' to obtain their desires" (Goodman, 1989, p. 94). The fact that charter schools are authorized as largely self-governing institutions casts a deep shadow of obligation over what they contribute and what the public can demand that they contribute toward educational reform and social melioration. The special freedom that charter schools enjoy represents more than a private banner of emancipation. The responsibilities that come with autonomy imply that charter schools possess both the will and capacity to formulate moral purposes and democratic values that encourage diverse constituents to participate in the competing demands of community. In such a formulation, individuals require strong community through which to express themselves and legitimate their needs as much as community depends on strong individuals to provide critical discourse and direction to the pursuit of collective goals. This dialectical relationship is one in which the lives of children and adults are respected and cared for in mutually fulfilling ways.

The Problem of Impaired Communities

But as Sandhills and Somerset illustrate, new possibilities for action do not invariably translate into positive outcomes. In these two instances, neither a well-intentioned nor deterministic approach toward the formation of community came with a guarantee of success. As a consequence, the energies of constituents were needlessly dissipated in a tangle of undistilled purposes and principles. At Hickory Ridge, the reaction of the founders and staff against the authoritarian intrusion of the state in curricular and pedagogical matters took the form of a cultural rebellion that essentially replaced the official ideology with an orthodoxy more to their liking. Their goal was far different from one in which the educational process would be reconstituted such that meanings and understandings would emerge from the interests and social connections shared by citizens in a democracy. In the Core Knowledge regime, knowledge is perceived to be independent of the learner, a key theoretical assertion that enables the transmission of a common cultural schemata. Factors of race, class, and gender are ascribed little weight in explaining persistent patterns of cultural domination and why some schoolchildren go on to more rewarding academic careers than others. In the singular view of truth advanced by Hirsch's conception of literacy, reserving classroom space for the forging of shared meanings and multicultural identities is irrelevant to the cold transmission of knowledge from the teacher-knower to the student-unknower (see Feinberg, 1997, 1998, 1999).

Because the study schools were chosen for their diversity rather than their exemplary qualities, it is plausible to infer that in the expanding constellation of charter schools, their experiences are not anomalous. When confronted with obstacles similar to those presented in this study, it may be inevitable that a percentage of charters will become mired in the uncertainties of community. Just as all students are not at the same readiness level when they begin a school year, not all charters are endowed with comparable stores of knowledge and resources or the capacity for self-governance and community development. As Sarason (1998) explains, some policy makers and charter school personnel may be inordinately sanguine about the ease with which innovative educational settings can be created. Any attempt to make community a more intelligible and satisfying school experience for students, teachers, and families requires membership to be a voluntary act. Schools are transformed from within, with the consent and engagement of the local stakeholders who constitute that particular school and community (Barth, 1990). The culture of the school that grows out of these purposeful relationships will ultimately be the decisive factor that either hinders or facilitates progress toward a set of identified goals. To get certain schools unstuck, some outside assistance may be required.

The dilemma faced by bureaucratically constituted school systems interested in building stronger community in schools is that the process simply cannot be instigated by decree. Coercion is the antithesis of the deliberative care and yearning for connection that forms the human underlayment of community. Among a school's constituents, coercion is likely to yield nothing in the way of substantive gains. In fact, it will probably only generate additional strata of disaffection, intolerance, and mistrust. A consensual pooling of talent and a more equitable distribution of power cannot be induced by external agents engaged in orderly social planning who are determined to bring about greater systemic efficiency. Partnerships for change require a level of trust and dialogue among constituents that goes beyond treating them as audiences for the district's or state's ideas about reform. By linking democratic principles and support structures to school change, the process becomes exponentially harder to engineer because it necessitates the surrender of excessive ideological rigidity for the mutual benefit of all (Glickman, 1993).

Unless North Carolina's political leaders and school decision makers come together to more definitively articulate a set of core democratic principles that should undergird the charter

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school formation process, the state will find itself increasingly circumvented as a source of leadership in the shift toward greater community-based reform. Moreover, the voids in the current policy framework practically assure that the character of community will become the exclusive prerogative of membership peculiar to each separate community. If this happens, charter schools will be permitted to drift closer toward a normative conception of schooling that acts to reinforce society's preoccupation with competitive excellence achieved through alienating practices built around counterfeit notions of meritocratic worth. In such a model, persons are viewed as atomistic individuals intent on enhancing their private liberties and material well-being. This orientation stands in sharp contrast to a participatory view of students operating as socially cohesive persons. In this construction, students' qualities as citizens are perceived as a function of the meaningful relationships they are able to sustain as members of caring communities possessing purposes and values with which they can identify (Sandel, 1982). When education policy making abstains from vigorous open debate over the connections between democratic values, social empowerment, and intellectual freedom, charter schools are tacitly given free rein to become insular institutions occupying any of the moral ground stretching between a narcissistic brand of individualism on one extreme and a numbing social conformity on the other. In a technologically driven postmodern society growing more culturally assertive and economically polarized, suffering profound dislocations in family and community life, neither alternative appears particularly hopeful.

Without the political freedom and diversity of ideas allowed through direct democratic control, charter schools can become the ideological tools through which students are made the unwitting recipients of any number of dogmatic teachings about knowledge and culture (Proefriedt, 1985). Contemporary debate over education seems to be nearing consensus on at least one fundamental idea: that there are numerous pathways to truth and any number of ways of being an educated person. Current trends in testing and assessment suggest that our public schools are not keeping pace in providing all students with equitable opportunities to explore these various dimensions of learning. And even though traditional public schooling has often been employed as a political instrument to control what and how students learn, this doesn't preclude the state from recognizing the alternative educational visions proposed by some charter schools as assets not to be squandered.

Charters can remain a largely independent movement while providing the North Carolina school system with a valuable external mechanism for interrogating the foundations, assumptions, and perspectives of its own programs and practices. The fundamental normative problem that each of the study schools attempted to resolve was "Community to what end?" Given the array of answers able to be applied to this question, community assumed a spectrum of meanings and characteristics that did not always escape the bounded geographies of neighborhood, race, ethnicity, class, and power. In light of these findings, the state should reconsider the wisdom of remaining agnostic about enunciating a strongly democratic mission for charter schools. Such an imposition need not be excessively restrictive. In the wake of the Cold War, democratic values are no longer a survival issue for the West and its institutions. As a society, we have arrived at a turning point in educational politics where we need to decide whether government will deal with its citizens as human beings or as special interest groups or client-based constituencies. Charters need to be distinguished from site-based managed schools which operate within the regulatory orbit of the state and which often lack the capacity or motivation to recreate themselves in truly innovative ways. To the extent that charter schools also fall short of this criterion, this bold adventure in school change will produce negligible results. Because of this potential, it is incumbent upon the state to remain diligent about investing its time and resources in any misguided attempt directed at rendering charters into aimless clones of the schools we already have.

Historically and philosophically, a consumer-oriented doctrine of individual rights, self-reliance, and social mobility has been more pronounced in American society than a vision centered around shared democratic enlightenment (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Sandel, 1996). Barber (1994) notes that "The literacy required to live in civil society, the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberately in a pluralistic world, the empathy that permits us to hear and thus accommodate others, all involve skills that must be acquired" (p. 4). Similarly, the propensity of our public schools to embrace values and ends that often operate at cross purposes is well documented (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981; Labaree, 1997; Reese, 1988). This study confirms the cogency of these observations. It exposes the fragility of charter school coalitions and the inexperience of constituents in building diverse and collaborative school communities organized around democratic-communitarian principles rather than the impersonal technocratic relationships effected through bureaucracy or the free-market values disseminated through an economistic world view.

Perhaps disappointingly but not altogether surprisingly, the majority of founders and practitioners in the study schools were found to be unversed in the dynamics of school-as-community in any but an abstract sense. That is, their practical knowledge of community generally failed to live up to their enthusiastic endorsement of the idea. Given the special problems associated with constructing a school organized around the social logic and ethical calculus of community, this shortcoming is problematic for the charter school movement as much as it is forgivable. It is unreasonable to expect that every charter school leader possesses an equal capacity to establish a thriving learning community in the way that we take new appliances out of the box and plug them in, confident they will perform as described. Schools that function in qualitatively different ways from the ones with which we are most familiar simply do not come ready-to-go.

Educators who lack first-hand knowledge of what viable school communities look and feel like seem to have little choice but to proceed in a slightly haphazard fashion. In fact, perhaps it would be beneficial to the charter school movement as a whole if policy makers, researchers, educators, and concerned members of the public simply acknowledged that many of these schools will falter at first. Perhaps then different levels of resources could be marshaled in an attempt to alleviate the material and philosophical deficits these schools seem assured of facing. Without sufficient prototypes to emulate or an abundant store of personal experiences to draw upon, the learning curve can be steep for charter school personnel constrained into going it alone. In such instances, the enduring regularities of schooling described by Sarason (1996) serve as the default mode of operation, exerting a compelling influence over the thinking and behavior of educators striving for improvement.

When confronted with uncertainty, doubts about reform can impinge upon even the best of intentions. It will require the selfless support of all constituents in a charter school to subdue the inclination to implement prior conceptions of what "real school" (Metz, 1988) is all about. In this regard, the cultural and political embeddedness of founders, principals, and teachers can serve as additional limitations to work around since these variables are implicitly expressed through a variety of dispositions pertaining to the distinctive ways these actors interpret American society and the place of schools within it. In a school environment characterized by high stress, any one of us may feel pressured to play it safe by recreating the world we already know. Getting the members of a charter school to freely relinquish the limited but dependable security of an encapsulated life for more associative and potentially richer but also less discernible outcomes is likely to be a more challenging proposition than many charter school operators and policy makers might choose to believe.

Yet despite the often intense problems that surfaced in some of the study schools, it would be a mistake to discount the fact that founders, principals, and teachers willingly came together to inquire about new possibilities for enlarging the collective capacities of children and adults in shaping a more civil and moral society. For the participants in this study, the metaphor of school-as-community evoked the essence of what this quest was seeking to reclaim or build anew. If community-oriented charter schools are to grow into something tangible and permanent that have relevance for all schools intent on creating a culture of schooling that is at once both intellectually vital and democratically engaged, we must find ways of nourishing this desire lest it evaporate or burn itself out. As Everhart (1993) remarks:

> [C]ommunity is more than just sharing some general beliefs or opinions about one segment of everyday life, such as schooling. True community must involve nothing less than a normative restructuring of life's multiple dimensions, including education. This is a difficult objective to achieve in a highly individualistic society, one within which virtually everything is predicated upon specialization, segmentation, and the misplaced assumption that each individual is exclusively responsible for his or her own destiny.... Ours is not an economic or social system that encourages community, nor does it provide many structural alternatives to reverse this pattern (p. 212).

Because the educational climate is never neutral or value-free, there is a need to situate the competing aims and ideals of education in an analytical context such that educational priorities can be translated into comprehensible social, political, and moral commitments. At their best, charter schools need to be organized around the idea of a participatory democracy in which mutuality, leadership, and excellence emerge out of collaborative efforts directed toward an ethical school restructuring that forges closer links between families, schools, and communities.

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